



KOKORO CONNECT

K I Z U — R A N D O M

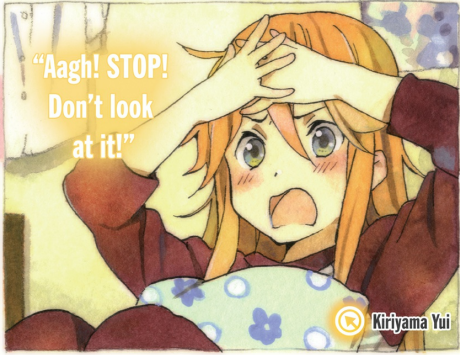
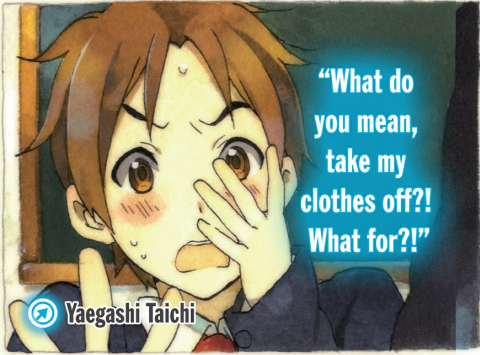
Sadanatsu Anda



KOKORO CONNECT

K I Z U — R A N D O M







DAY
9

"BOTH
OF YOU,
STOP IT
RIGHT
NOW!"

"I thought
you were
better than
that."

DAY
1

"Ow, my
hand! I'm...
bleeding...?
What? Did...
Did I do that
to the table?
So it wasn't a
dream..."

DAY
8

Table of Contents

<Chapter 1> Can't Stop Can't Stop Can't Stop

<Chapter 2> By The Time We Realized, It Had Already Begun... Again

<Chapter 3> Our New Normal

<Chapter 4> Falling Apart

<Chapter 5> Stronger Together

<Chapter 6> Can't Unsee It

<Chapter 7> Showdown

<Chapter 8> Using Her Words

<Epilogue> Inaba Himeko Strikes Back

Afterword



Prologue: It Struck Without Warning

[Do it.]

A voice rings out in my head, so clearly it makes my skin crawl. The sound reverberates inside my skull, from my inner ears to my medulla oblongata, evoking a deep shudder down my spine. It feels like someone spoke directly into my brain.

But who?

I contemplate it for a moment, but hesitate. The voice sounded identical to my own.

Meanwhile, my body is suddenly burning hot, my face flushed red.

I feel lightheaded. My senses begin to melt into a haze, almost like I've come down with a vicious fever.

My body begins to pull away and move of its own accord, as though I'm no longer myself.

Something is swallowing me whole... and yet my consciousness doesn't fade. I remain lucid.

Unfamiliar desires well up inside me, unbidden, demanding to be set free. I fight it down, but it fights back—an incendiary impulse spurring me forth.

Stop it. Don't fight me. Shut up. Deal with it. I can't just do that.

And yet my body moves nonetheless, as though disconnected entirely from my mind.

I don't want to, and yet I want to so very badly...

Wait, so I *do* want to? So *of course* my body is going to move?

Are these desires truly “unfamiliar” and “unbidden”?

[Make your dreams reality.]

The voice—my voice—rings out in my head once more, but not of my own

volition.

I don't understand. My mind reels. My body boils.

Then I realize what's happening.

I want to yell "When did this happen?!" but the words catch in my throat.

I'm horrified. I can't believe what I'm doing.

I scream at myself to stop, but no sound escapes my lips. Separated from my body, all I can do is watch from a distance.

My mouth moves. It asks for something I don't want.

Have I been possessed? By whom? By what? By myself?

...By myself?

My body moves without my permission. Where is it getting its orders? From me?

...From me?

Wait. I won't wait. I don't want to wait?

Stop. I don't want to stop?

What is happening? How is this happening?

—Oh god, I can't stop.

I can't stop. I can't stop. I can't stop. I can't stop. I can't stop. I can't stop. I can't stop.

—I don't want it to stop?

Chapter 1: Can't Stop Can't Stop Can't Stop

Yaegashi Taichi was a member of the Cultural Research Club (CRC for short): a club birthed from countless loopholes in the system at Yamaboshi High School. For example, its members consisted of five first-year students. And its objective? “A broader scope of research unfettered by existing frameworks.” Translation: anything goes.

Contrary to the expectations this vague objective might have suggested to someone, the CRC was incredibly lax. Granted, they did at least put out some semblance of a monthly publication in the form of the “Culture Bulletin,” but it was transparently little more than an outlet for the club members’ varied interests. One could easily make the case that they were just screwing around.

But then one day, without warning, the CRC was afflicted by a supernatural phenomenon that turned their ordinary lives upside down. The five of them met a being known only as «Heartseed» who told them that they would be swapping bodies at random. It was the sort of thing any sane human would laugh off as impossible... which had no relevance to it actually happening. And when something unbelievable happens to you, as it turns out, your only choice from then on is to start believing it. They couldn’t run from it. All they could do was endure it.

At some times it was stressful; at others, downright painful.

But the five of them worked together to overcome it.

The crisis taught them a lot, and when the phenomenon finally faded, thankfully that knowledge was all that stuck around afterwards. No lingering scars.

Three weeks had passed, and the last lingering remnants of summer had faded into deep autumn. The hellish experience was still deeply engraved in their hearts... but now it had begun to fade into distant memory.



The five o'clock bell rang, signaling for all students to leave campus.

"Argh! I still have a little more to go, goddamnit!" Inaba Himeko slammed her keyboard and turned away from the laptop entirely. Clucking her tongue, she ran her hands through her glossy, dark, shoulder-length hair.

Instantly, Rec Hall Room 401—the CRC clubroom—came to life with cheers and groans.

"Inaban, how could you? I believed in you!" howled Nagase Iori, the prettiest girl in their grade. She lay slumped over the table, rolling her head from side to side, her ponytail bobbing with her movements.

"Yesss! See, I told ya! Not even Inabacchan coulda pulled it off!" smirked Aoki Yoshifumi, the tallest and lankiest of the five, as he jumped to his feet. "So that settles it! You're buyin' me a drink on the way home, Iori-chan!" His curly, unkempt strands bounced in time to his victory dance.

As it happened, Nagase and Aoki had placed a wager on whether or not Inaba would finish editing together the Culture Bulletin before the last bell.

"Not to like, repeat myself, but I literally can't believe you guys would bet on her when the delay was *your* fault in the first place," Kiriya Yui sighed wearily, her long reddish-brown hair cascading over her petite yet muscular frame.

"Seriously," Yaegashi Taichi chimed in. Something told him karma would bite them in the ass for this.

"Pffhahaha! Winner, winner, chicken dinner! I'm tellin' ya, Inabacchan's only human. She's got her limits just like the rest of us," said Aoki.

"Nngh... Inaba Himeko, I thought you were better than this..." muttered Nagase.

Evidently the two of them were more than content to carry on discussing Inaba's faults right in front of her—

"Oh well. Don't let it get ya down, Inabacchan," said Aoki.

"Hmph... I think she ought to feel at least *partly* responsible for this," said Nagase.

On and on and on—

“Shove it, you two!”

—until Inaba poked them both in the eyes. The two of them yelped and flailed in pain.

Serves you right, Taichi thought. He glanced at Kiriyaama, and they smirked at each other.

“I’m actually a little impressed that Inaba was somehow able to poke both pairs of eyes with both of her hands at the same time,” Kiriyaama commented.

“It was way more than a little impressive if you ask me,” Taichi replied. *And also a little bit terrifying.*

“This wouldn’t have happened if you idiots had turned your goddamn articles in on time! Now thanks to you, I have even *more* homework to do! Cough up that drink, Aoki!” Inaba seized Aoki by the shoulders and narrowed her eyes menacingly.

“Uh... I don’t see how the drink has anything to do with—”

“What was that?” Inaba clamped down harder.

“Y-YES, MA’AM!”

“That makes sense. Inaba’s been working so hard on this, y’know? Makes total sense for the drink to go to her instead. Hahaha!”

“I-Iori-chan?! I can’t believe you! I feel so betrayed!”

“Oh, *you* feel betrayed? It’s totally your fault for trying to turn in that half-assed garbage you called an article,” Kiriyaama snapped, raising her shapely brows. “Right, Taichi?”

“Well... I suppose the article could’ve been better, yeah. Felt a little... tame, I guess? You gotta take more of a hardline stance when you write, like in my article ‘A Guide to Pro Wrestling Moves: Rope Work & Camera Work Edition’—”

“Tch... Should have picked someone else.”

“...You know, it’s not nice to mutter under your breath like that...”

It wasn’t like Kiriyaama to cluck her tongue. Maybe he’d actually pissed her

off... What had he done wrong, though?

“Gimme a break! I thought ‘Cutest Girl in the CRC: A Survey for the Guys of Yamaboshi High’ was a pretty good idea!” Aoki insisted stubbornly.

“Hell no!” Kiriya refused. “I don’t want that kind of attention! Besides, it’s obvious Iori would win. Not that I *mind* losing to her, but I’d at least like to compete on a level playing field!”

“Don’t be silly, Yui! You’ve still got a chance! I hear more and more guys prefer underdeveloped girls these days! Heck, Taichi might be one of them,” Iori remarked casually, her smile utterly devoid of ill intent.

“Wow, Nagase, that was vicious. You implied Kiriya can’t beat you without appealing to a niche audience, then turned around and threw *me* under the bus, too. Pretty next-level stuff. Just FYI, though, I’m *not* part of that niche, thank you!”

He knew she wasn’t actually *trying* to be vicious. She was just more openly honest about her thoughts these days. Shame his retort came out a little long-winded.

“You guys are nuts. Iori-chan’s hot and that’s a fact, but Yui’s got tons of secret admirers,” Aoki smirked knowingly.

“Why do they have to hide it?! Is it really that shameful?!” Kiriya wailed.

Inaba slammed her hands on the table. “Will you people get ready to go already?! How is it that you had all that time to just sit around and yet somehow I’m still the first to finish packing up?!”

She had a point.

Together, the five of them left the Rec Hall and walked to the school gates. The sun was setting, and the sports clubs were starting to wrap up their practice for the day.

“I-Inaba... I got you this...” True to her word, Nagase had made a beeline straight to the vending machine and purchased a can of coffee, which she then offered to Inaba.

“Thanks. You know, despite all the hijinks you people got into, I still feel bad making you pay for it.” Inaba reached into her bookbag to pull out her wallet.

“Perish the thought, my lady! You’re the one who has to manage our ineptitude. ‘Tis the least I can do!” Nagase responded in a dramatic affectation.

Inaba took the can. “Alright.”

“*You’re* the whole reason she has to work late. What about the least *you* can do?” Kiriyaama asked flatly in Aoki’s direction.

“Nngh... I’ll figure something out later...” Aoki whimpered, slumping his shoulders. Then he looked up suddenly. “Wait... But this never would’ve happened if *she* hadn’t rejected my article in the first place!”

“*Obviously* she was going to reject it, you birdbrain!”

As Aoki and Kiriyaama started to bicker, a voice called out from behind.

“Oh, hey kids! Working late on your club assignment? Nice to see you’re all taking this seriously! As your club advisor, I couldn’t be prouder. Not that I contribute anything.”

It was Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor for Class 1-C and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club. The students at Yamaboshi liked to call him “Gossan” for short, some out of affection, others out of contempt. His laid-back, spontaneous personality gave him quite the particular reputation as a teacher—and not in a good way.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me. Inaba, Nagase, and Yaegashi...” He named the three CRC members under his advisory in Class 1-C. “Due to a sudden and unexpected business trip, I’m switching tomorrow’s second period class with the next day’s third period... and I kinda forgot to tell the class... Can you help me out?”

“Help you out?! You’re the adult! You need to have all your class shit figured out on your own!” Here was Inaba, literally scolding her own teacher. Even more frightening was the realization that Taichi was getting used to it by now.

“I do feel bad about it, honest! I know it’s a hassle... and the other teachers are gonna be pissed at me come tomorrow morning...”

“And I’ll bet you’re mostly worried about that last part,” Inaba glared through narrowed eyes.

“N-Not mostly! It’s like 40-60, tops!”

“Same difference!”

Inaba looked ready to punch him, so Taichi decided to step in. “I’ll go ahead and send some emails around to everybody I know.”

“Me too. Don’t worry, Gossan. We got this,” Nagase chimed in.

“Yaegashi! Nagase! You’re such good kids! Thank you!”

This 25-year-old adult man needed to learn how to do his job.



The next day after school, Taichi and Inaba left classroom 1-C and headed to the clubroom. Nagase had been assigned cleaning duty for the day, and so she would be joining them a little later.

“Well, if it isn’t Taichi and Inabacchan!”

Taichi turned to find Aoki standing there with Kiriya at his side. He noticed, however, that they were headed in the opposite direction, away from the Rec Hall. “Hey guys... Did you get saddled with some random task?”

“Yeah, just a little errand. I got assigned as class helper for the day,” Kiriya answered.

“Me too! Guess what, Taichi! Me and Yui always get assigned to stuff together! That’s how you know we’re meant to be!”

“No, it’s because our names both start with Y, genius!”

“And you know what they call that? Destiny.”

“Yeah, maybe—Oh god, I almost *agreed* with you! Yikes! I’m getting too careless!”

“Okay, whatever. So you’ll be a little late getting to the clubroom, I take it?” Inaba cut in.

“Oh, right. Yeah. Sorry, Inaba.”

“Hmph. Great...” Inaba waited until Kiriya and Aoki had left, then added under her breath, “And after all that work I put in by myself at home last night...”

Evidently she was less than pleased. Taichi made a mental note to try and stay on her good side.

Scene: Rec Hall, Room 401.

“Say, Taichi. Doesn’t it piss you off when people waste your time, regardless of whether it’s their fault or not?”

Inaba sat across the table from Taichi, staring down at her laptop as she spoke.

“Well, if it’s not their fault, I’d say there’s no point in getting mad at them,” Taichi replied, hoping to mollify her a bit before the others arrived.

“Okay, you’re not wrong. But ultimately you’d still get frustrated, though, wouldn’t you?”

“Well... Maybe a little, I guess...?”

“And you’d naturally want to take it out on someone, yeah?”

“What? No! That wouldn’t do anyone any good!”

“Sure it would. Even if they don’t deserve it, at least you’d be getting the anger out of your system.”

“Don’t be a sociopath! You’d just be passing that anger onto someone else!”

“And? That’s just how the world works, my friend.”

“Good point... Wait, no it isn’t!”

“Nope... It’s not ‘good,’ that’s for sure.” Inaba could make anything sound reasonable when she said it with her head held high. She snickered, then continued. “Actually, I just wanted to mess with you. It’s good stress relief.” The corner of her lips curled up in a smirk.

“Whoa... You managed to vent your stress without causing me any harm? That’s a pretty high-level technique. I don’t think I could pull it off myself.”

“You’re not supposed to be impressed, idiot,” she scoffed.

Just take the compliment, would you?

“Anyway. You were gonna do homework, right? Sorry for interrupting.”

With that, Inaba turned back to her laptop screen and Taichi went back to his math problems. While most students simply copied answers from their friends, he made a point of doing his work on his own. After all, he wouldn’t learn anything unless he put in the effort.

Minutes of unbroken silence ticked by.

And then Inaba Himeko started to take off her clothes.

First, she pulled her arms out of the sleeves of her blazer jacket. With his mind still occupied by formulas and variables, Taichi shot a quick glance in her direction, then turned back to his work.

There was a soft *fwump* as the jacket hit the floor by her feet. Taichi looked up from his worksheet to find her pulling her black cardigan over her head.

“Hey, Inaba, your jacket’s on the floor.”

“Hm...? Oh.”

Her response was so vague, it wasn’t clear if she had actually heard him. Her face was flushed—almost feverishly so—and the static from her cardigan was making her usually tidy hair stand on end.



Next she pulled off her tie. Then, without stopping, her hands moved straight to the buttons on her blouse.

Snap.

There went the top button.

Snap.

Then the second.

The sound was distractingly loud.

Snap.

Then the third.

Now her chest was completely exposed—pale skin that would ordinarily never see the light of day in public. Combined with the starched white of her shirt, she was practically glowing. Her patterned black bra had no lace or frills. Her skin was so translucent, the veins peeking out near the bottom of her cleavage drew his gaze in like a magnet.

Then his brain finally kicked in.

What is she doing?

Evidently he'd forgotten how to say words until that moment.

"The hell are you doing, taking your clothes off in here?! It's freezing! This is the clubroom! This isn't your house! Did you forget I'm sitting right here?!" Flustered at his own delayed reaction, he blurted everything out at once... but Inaba ignored him and finished unbuttoning her shirt completely. "Stop! Hold on! Calm down, Inaba! I-Is your back itchy or something?! J-Just put your clothes back on, for god's sake!"

But in spite of Taichi's plea, Inaba slid her unbuttoned shirt down her shoulders, baring her upper back for all to see and exposing her pale, slender, sexy curves.

Then, with her shirt draped lazily over her forearms and hips, she roughly flung her laptop to the side, got out of her chair, and climbed onto the table in Taichi's direction.

The wood creaked under her full weight. She was now right before his eyes... and in a state of significant undress.

Taichi froze, unable to speak. He kept his eyes firmly on hers, willing himself not to look at her nearly-bare torso. Her normally steely facade was now flushed and feverish and... desperate.

“Hurry up and take those clothes off,” she said, looking straight into his eyes. For a moment, he forgot to breathe.

“What do you mean, take my clothes off?! What for?! We’re at school, remember?! There’s gotta be a better place to do this—Wait, no! What am I saying?! It’s not what you think—I’m not getting any weird ideas in my head, okay?! Just... Just put your clothes back on, alright?!” At this point, his mouth was basically on autopilot.

“We can’t do it unless you get naked.” For a girl, her voice was rather deep and commanding... and in this context, it was extremely hot.

“Will you quit talking like that?! ...Wait, I get it! I’m onto you, you bully! Th- This is some kind of trick, isn’t it? And you want me to fall for it so you can point and laugh! Another one of your de-stress techniques, right? Haha... Well, you’re going way overb—”

She grabbed his arm, and instantly his words faltered. He could feel a strange heat radiating from her soft, delicate hand.

“Come on...” She took his hand, and though her grip was by no means forceful, Taichi found he couldn’t resist her. Then she began to guide it in the direction of her breasts—

“Whoa! Th-That’s crossing a line!” Taichi yanked his hand back before it could make contact with her black patterned bra... and in doing so, pulled Inaba forward along with it.

“Huh? Aah!”

Inaba lost her balance and toppled forward in Taichi’s direction. Unable to support her weight, Taichi’s center of gravity tipped backwards in his chair.

“Whoa!”

The chair and table clattered loudly to the floor as the two landed in a heap.

“Guh!” Sandwiched between the hard linoleum and Inaba’s body weight, the impact knocked the air from his lungs. “Ow ow ow... Hey, are you okay? ...Whoa!” During the fall, he’d used his body to shield Inaba, and as a result she was now straddling him with his arms around her. “I... I didn’t mean to touch you, I swear!” Squeezing his eyes shut, he hastily pushed her away—

Squish.

He felt something strangely soft and pillowy—something he had only ever experienced once prior, in fact.

Taichi opened his eyes.

He was touching her breasts with both hands.

Startled, his mind and body froze completely.

And then the clubroom door opened.

Taichi shifted his gaze to the door. Kiriya and Aoki were standing there, rooted to the spot.

He could only imagine what it must have looked like—Inaba Himeko, half-naked, straddling Yaegashi Taichi, who was touching her breasts—

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH! What the heck are you guys DOING, ohmi GAAAAWD!” Kiriya howled at the top of her lungs.

Not that Taichi blamed her. If there was one thing he was good at, it was staying level-headed in a crisis.

“Break it up! Break it up! BREAK! IT! UP!” she screamed hysterically.

“Whoa, Yui! I get how you feel, but let’s take a deep breath, alright?” She was freaking out so badly, Aoki instinctively moved to calm her down.

“I kn—Hggh!” Before Taichi could get the words out, Inaba suddenly jumped to her feet, crushing his stomach. Without so much as an apology, she walked over and picked up her discarded clothing.

Taichi wracked his brain for something to say to her—*I understand how you feel, but this is why I told you not to strip in the first place—you need to think*

about how other people will see it—

But then he took one look at her and stopped.

She was deathly pale; her hands shook as she struggled to put her uniform back on. Hell, she looked like she was on the verge of passing out. This was no time to be scolding her. All things considered, she was very clearly not in a normal state of mind.

“So? Care to explain what we just walked in on?” Kiriya asked, seemingly unconcerned with Inaba’s current condition. The former karate champion’s eyes were naturally almond-shaped, but now they were narrowed into furious slits. Her toned body was shaking with boiling-hot rage, her long chestnut hair practically standing on end.

Meanwhile, Taichi was desperate to buy some time. “C-Can you give us a minute? We kinda need to figure that part out ourse—”

His words were drowned out by the sound of splintering wood. Something clattered in pieces to the floor. Then, once the room had fallen silent once more —

“TELL ME *RIGHT NOW!*”

Kiriya Yui had driven her fist completely through the table—that is, the one that wasn’t knocked over—and snapped it in half.

She was completely overreacting, even by Kiriya standards. This was way farther than she normally would have gone.

“Yui?! What the heck’s gotten into you?!” Aoki shouted, clearly panicked.

As if on cue, the rage faded from Kiriya’s eyes, and the heat drained from her cheeks.

“How...? What happened? Ow, my hand! I’m... bleeding...? What? Did... Did I do that to the table? I did, didn’t I? So it wasn’t a dream... What’s going on? Why would I do this? It doesn’t make sense... I wasn’t *that* angry about it... Why...? Oh god... I’m scared...” Kiriya began to tremble, her eyes filled with tears.

And then the last member of the CRC arrived—the club president, Nagase

lori.

“ ‘Sup guys... Wait, what happened to the TABLES?! Why is that one straight-up BROKEN?! This whole room is a freaking mess! ...Wait, Yui, you’re bleeding! Let me see!” Nagase strode right over to KiriYama and took her hand. “Okay... Just a small cut, it looks like. Let’s get you washed up in the bathroom. Then we’ll head to the nurse’s office to patch you up, okay?”

“I-lori...!” KiriYama burst into loud sobs.

“Hey now, what’s wrong? Does it hurt? It’s okay. It’s all okay now.” Nagase pulled KiriYama into a tight hug and stroked her long hair reassuringly. “Taichi! Aoki! Inaban! What’re you just standing around for? We need to get this mess cleaned up and report it to the staff room!”

And so, thanks to Nagase’s quick thinking and initiative, the situation was resolved... if only on the surface.

After that, the CRC went straight home.



That night, after he got home from school, Taichi sat in his room and stared at the wall, thinking about everything that had happened that day.

Inaba seduced him. Then KiriYama got way, way, way too angry about it.

Neither of them had seemed very rational. When asked about it later on, both of them said they hadn’t wanted or intended to do it, and yet somehow they went and did it anyway.

It made no sense. What *was* that?

But for all his contemplation, he was no closer to an answer.

Good thing Nagase was there to save the day, he thought. *Who knows what might’ve happened if she hadn’t turned up when she did.*

At the end of the day, Nagase was a reliable friend—

Just then, Taichi heard a voice.

[Are you just going to let things stay like this forever?]

Was it coming from somewhere outside his room? No.

Did he imagine it? No.

Did he say it himself? No.

Was it a memory he replayed in his mind? No.

Did it skip his ears and go straight to his brain? Yes.

What the hell was that?

The voice was too clear to be a trick of his imagination.

A chill ran down his spine. How could he hear a voice without using his ears?

Suddenly, an intense heat ignited inside his body, overwriting the chill and dulling his senses, almost like a fever.

Almost like... he wasn't himself anymore.

He remained conscious, but he felt disconnected from himself... and his mind was filled with thoughts of Nagase Iori.

Her pretty, round face; her pale, translucent skin; her large, bright eyes; her straight nose; her silky hair tied back in a bouncy ponytail; her perfect, evenly-balanced figure...

Soon Taichi was hit with a strange, inexplicable impulse. One single emotion drowned out all the rest. He didn't recall ever deciding to act on it... and yet his body was already moving. Grabbing his cell phone, he got to his feet. Then, as he navigated the menus, he dashed out of his room and down the stairs. He tried to stop himself, but the impulse rampaging inside him was far stronger. There was no suppressing it.

Once he arrived at the first floor, he made a beeline to the front door. There, he put his shoes on and opened the door to leave—and in that instant, the fever ebbed.

His senses regained, he felt more like himself again—not just some strange, internal observer. The impulse that brought him here was no more.

For a moment, Taichi simply stood there. One minute his body was practically on fire, and the next it was as if nothing ever happened. It was eerie how such an intense sensation somehow left no evidence of its presence.

He looked at his phone. The screen displayed the address book entry for “Nagase Iori.”

Confused, Taichi decided to head back to his room. Once there, he collapsed into a sitting position on the floor.

What in the world was *that*? It had felt like he was being strung along by something else... something that wasn't him.

He looked back at his cell phone. The entry for “Nagase Iori” was still on screen. What did his body want from her?

That would be when his cell phone decided to ring, playing the early techno song used as an entrance theme by one of his favorite pro wrestlers.

“Whoa!”

Startled, Taichi dropped his phone onto the carpet. He hastily scooped it back up and checked the screen—and his heart skipped a beat. The caller was none other than the very person currently occupying his mind.

Willing his heartbeat to stay under control, he answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Listen, Taichi, I want to talk about us!” Nagase blurted out on the other end of the line. But then her voice faltered. “...About us...?” she repeated faintly in a questioning tone.

“Wh-What’s the matter, Nagase? Is something wrong?”

“Why did I...? Oh, uh, it’s nothing. Anyway, hi...”

“Uh... Hi.”

There was a pause.

“So, um... Today sure was crazy, huh?”

“Yeah, pretty crazy.”

Another pause.

“Uggghhh... Look, I’m sorry... I don’t know what I was thinking... I just randomly wanted to call you for some reason! I had this feeling like I really needed to talk to you, and then the next thing I knew, I was kinda operating on autopilot, almost.”

Operating on autopilot.

That sounded an awful lot like the weird impulse he had experienced just moments earlier.

“Actually, uh... just now... I don’t know what it was, but... for some reason I randomly felt like either calling you or going to see you in person.”

“Yeah, I know it doesn’t make sense—Wait, what? You felt it too?”

That’s what it was. He’d been convinced that he needed to talk to Nagase. And that desire had ballooned out of control. This begged the question: where had it come from in the first place?

If he couldn’t control it, then that suggested some sort of external force... but if it was a pre-existing desire inside him, then it had to be internal... right...?

“What’s going on with us? I mean... something’s not right, don’t you think?” Nagase asked.

“Yeah... Something’s weird, but I’m not sure what,” he answered. Evidently they had similar misgivings about the situation at hand.

Inaba and Kiriya’s earlier misbehavior flashed through his mind, and dark shadows flickered at the edges of his consciousness.

“Okay, well... Let’s get back on topic, then... Wait, where were we...? Oh crap, I didn’t even *start* the topic yet!”

“You wanted to talk about us, right? That’s what you said when I answered the phone, anyway... So what did you want to talk about specifically?”

“Nnn... W-Well, to be fair, you clearly wanted to talk to me too! What’s up?”

“Oh, uh... Well, I...”

He thought back to the sudden fever, the impulse that had driven his body to act of its own accord. He remembered feeling that he was no longer himself.

Silence fell for the umpteenth time... and then—

“When I confessed to you—”

“When you confessed to me—”

They inadvertently spoke in perfect unison, and as the realization hit—

“Oh, sorry...”

“Oh, sorry!”

—they did it a second time.

“Well, um... L-Looks like we were both thinking the same thing... I think...”

“Y-Yeah... I’ve been wanting to double-check with you for a while now, but... things have been kinda hectic since then... So we sorta left things on vague terms, I guess...” He remembered their heart-to-heart about it during the crisis that was the body-swap, and he was pretty sure she’d been honest with him. But at the time it was all so surreal... Looking back, it almost felt like they were actors in a movie, and he couldn’t help but worry that the feelings they expressed to each other back then were little more than the suspension bridge effect at work—a byproduct of the crisis. Sort of like the trope where the action movie protagonist kisses his love interest while the bomb clock ticks down.

Compared with the relative tedium of their ordinary lives, the memory of their anguished love confession felt a little too perfect, almost like it had to be handled with care lest he inadvertently tarnish it.

“Do you still—” Nagase blurted out quickly, then paused. “Do you still... feel the same way you did back then...?”

She had beaten him to the punch. For a moment, he cursed his lack of bravery—but then he shook the thoughts away. This was no time for self-loathing. He needed to move forward, and the least he could do was be honest with her.

“I do. My feelings haven’t changed a bit.”

They were in love, but they weren’t officially together.

“...Oh... Cool... Umm... Same here.”

The conversation died there. This time, however, it didn’t feel awkward. In fact, it was perfectly comfortable—no, rather than comfortable—

“...Soooo... That’s really... about it...”

“Yeahhh... That’s pretty much all...”

It occurred to him that all this excess hesitation was probably the main reason their relationship was as of yet undefined.

“L-Let’s go ahead and wrap this up, I guess!”

“S-Sure, okay!”

God, I’m such a loser.

“Anyways, sorry for the random phone call! Bye!”

“Huh? Wait! Naga—!”

But she had already hung up.

Taichi closed his flip phone. He still had two problems—Nagase, and the weirdness from today—and was no closer to a resolution for either of them. He groaned and scratched his head.

Just then, he sensed a presence. He glanced at the door to his room.

Sure enough, his ten-year-old sister Rina peeked her head in. She had wavy, medium-length hair and big, round eyes like a puppy’s—eyes that were quietly fixed on him through the gap in the door. In her arms was a notebook with the word “MATH” scrawled across it in large letters.

“H-How long have you been standing there...?”

“Ummm... Around the time your phone rang and you got all startled and dropped it? No, wait, before that. You were staring at your phone.”

“Damn it, Rina! You eavesdropped on my whole conversation?!”

Kill me now.

It was decidedly not the sort of content he wanted to share with his kid sister.

“Sooo, bro... Was that your girlfriend on the phone just now?”

“Girlfriend? P-Perish the thought!”

Great, now I sound like Nagase.

“Aww, you’re embarrassed! How cute!”

“So what?! Don’t make fun of me—Wait, time out! I take that back!”

I can't let her get under my skin... I need to play it cool...

Taichi took a deep breath. Meanwhile, Rina snickered.

“Okay, whatever. I’m happy for you! You’ve been acting *really* weird lately... In fact, at one point I started to think maybe we needed to take you to the hospital...”

She must have been referring to the Era of the Body-Swap.

“...but now I get it! You were just lovesick!”

Now *that* was a misunderstanding of epic proportions.

“Stop that! What is with girls these days and turning everything into love this and romance that?! And where did you learn the word ‘lovesick,’ anyway?!”

“Hahaha! ‘Girls these days!’ You sound like a grumpy old man!”

“Wh... I’m not an old man! Middle-aged at most!”

That one stung a little.

“Okay, well, good to know! Next time you start acting all weird, I’ll just tell Mom and Dad you’ve got the lovesick blues. Hang in there, champ!”

“Mind your own business!”

He could imagine few things less appealing than the rest of his family sitting around gossiping about his love life.

“I gotta say, this is such a relief! Now I don’t have to feel bad if I get a boyfriend. Anyway, will you help me with my homework?”

“H-Hold it! You are *way* too young to be dating anyone, little missy! You understand me? If a boy so much as *looks* at you, I expect you to come to me first—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. I’ll tell you all about it—*later*. Now can you help me with these problems?”

“Th-That’s a promise, you hear me?! The minute anything remotely romantic happens, you better tell your big brother ASAP!”

“Good grief. You sound like an overprotective father...”

And so, struggling with his mixed feelings toward his little sister's steady ascent into young womanhood, Taichi helped Rina with her homework for a while, then ate dinner, watched some TV, took a bath... the usual routine.

Before long, his anxiety about the bizarre antics in the clubroom gradually began to fade. It was weird, sure, but hardly weirder than switching bodies. There was no crisis—no reason to sound the alarm.

At least, he wanted to believe that.

Unfortunately, he was wrong.

The next morning, Kiriya Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi were both arrested.

Chapter 2: By The Time We Realized, It Had Already Begun... Again

The next morning, Yaegashi Taichi's legs felt like lead as he trudged his way to school. He knew talking to Nagase Iori was going to be awkward... but even more so with Inaba Himeko. What would she say? *No matter what, I have to make sure not to look at her boobs*, he thought.

As it turned out, however, there was a more important crisis to deal with that morning.

The moment he walked into the classroom, an ashen-faced Inaba came running up to him. "There's trouble. Yui and Aoki have been taken into police custody."

It didn't register at first.

Police custody. Two words he (fortunately) wasn't used to hearing.

"What? Wait... What are you talking about? Yui and Aoki... as in Kiriyama Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi? *That* Yui and Aoki?"

"Who else, dipshit? Whatever. Just come with me!" Inaba grabbed Taichi by the arm and pulled him over to her desk.

There sat Nagase, staring blankly into space. "What do we do...?" she whispered in a tiny voice.

"What happened? What's the current situation down there? What is 'police custody,' anyway? Are they arrested?"

"Hell if I know! All I know is, the teachers are currently shitting bricks in the staff room."

"Oh my god... Have you tried calling them?"

"We tried... but..." Nagase's fingers tightened around her cell phone.

"Damn... Is there *anyone* who might have more info?"

“You rang?”

Startled, Taichi whirled around to find a familiar figure standing there, her dark hair tied back neatly, her bangs pinned up, her trademark glasses glittering. It was Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C, a girl who had originally appeared to be little more than your average teacher’s pet, but for some reason had recently blossomed into something of a motivational speaker, boasting a powerful influence over the class. Ultimately this resulted in Fujishima being christened “The Love Guru,” with rumors abound that she was now regularly doling out dating advice to dozens of lovelorn students.

(At one point Fujishima made the following statement: “You all should be proud. The CRC has opened a new door in my life—helped me discover my true calling. Thank you.” Everyone was confused by this.)

“Uhh... N-No... I don’t think anyone was talking to you, Fujishima-san...” Nagase muttered timidly.

Nagase had had some sort of bad experience with Fujishima once in the past, and ever since then, she had become noticeably uncomfortable around her.

(At one point Fujishima made the following statement regarding Nagase: “Relax. I have a new calling now. Nagase is no longer my top priority.” She didn’t elect to clarify what position Nagase had on her to-do list.)

“Oh really now? I thought you wanted to know more about what happened to Kiriya-san and Aoki-kun.”

“You know something?! Spit it out, Fujishima!”

“Didn’t your parents ever teach you how to ask nicely, Inaba-san?”

“Nnnghh... Please tell us what you know, Fujishima-san.”

Even the arrogant, audacious Inaba couldn’t ruffle Fujishima’s feathers. In fact, Fujishima’s attitude suggested she had her beat. It was frankly terrifying.

“Alright. I’ll tell you... if you let me rent Nagase-san for two hours.”

“Mwehgh?!” Nagase flinched and let out a weird, inhuman yelp.

“Uhh... I don’t think we can agree to that... Hahaha...” Taichi tried to laugh it off.

“A paltry request, is it not? Besides, I’m sure Nagase-san will have a great time.” Fujishima wiggled her fingers in a grabby-hands gesture.

“Not very cool of you, Fujishima!” Taichi shouted.

And once again, he heard a voice in his head.

[Don’t touch her.]

A feverish heat quickly began to build inside him.

Oh god no. It’s happening again.

He could feel himself slowly drifting away from his body, and yet his consciousness showed no signs of giving out.

It was the same sensation from yesterday. Once it combined with the emotions he felt right now, what would happen then? What would his body try to do?

Stop!

It was no use.

Taichi took a step toward Fujishima and raised his right fist.

Are you insane?! What are you doing?!

Taichi was completely lucid, and yet he could feel a separate will in control of his body.

You can’t do that!

But just as he prepared to take a swing at Fujishima—Inaba seized him by the wrist.

“The hell do you think you’re doing?” Her hand clamped down like a vice as she shot him an icy glare. Meanwhile, his right hand felt like it was on fire. In spite of his perfectly functioning rational mind, it yanked itself from her grasp. Furious, she tried to hold him back, but she only enraged him more. He ripped her hands off him and—came to a stop.

The fever faded, and with it, the energy that spurred his actions.

A chill ran down his spine. Inaba stared at him.

“What are you two doing over there? Practicing the tango?” Fujishima asked with a frown.

“N-No...” A cold sweat ran down his back. His brain hadn’t yet processed what had just happened.

“Well then... How about it, Nagase-san?”

“Will you just drop it...?” Taichi retorted—or rather, tried to, but the words left his lips in a weak whisper.

“It’s okay, Taichi... For the sake of Yui and Aoki... Nnnngghh... Okay! I’ll do it! You can have your two hours! Or three, if you want! Now please, Fujishima-san! Tell us what’s going on with them!”

“Oh, that? I was just kidding. Obviously I was going to tell you regardless.”

Nagase collapsed face-first onto the desk. “Are you serious?! I worked up all my courage for nothing!”

“This really isn’t the time to be screwing around with us, Fujishima!” Taichi snapped. Desperate to forget that terrifying impulse, he shook the memory from his mind.

“Please. It was just a joke! Don’t you have a sense of humor?”

“If it was a joke, then why’d you say it with a straight face...?” Nagase asked in a tiny voice, her cheek still pressed to the desk.

“I just wanted to lighten the mood a little! You all look like hell... That said, I wasn’t expecting it to go over so poorly...” Fujishima looked away sadly. Evidently she *did* have a conscience knocking around in there somewhere.

“So, can you tell us what you know?” Inaba looked eager to get to the point already.

“Oh, right. Very well, I’ll start from the beginning. This morning, at Chuuou Station, a group of delinquents from that low-class Akitaka High School started to harass a girl from Yamaboshi for whatever reason. Naturally the station was full of morning commuters, but apparently that wasn’t enough to stop the fight from escalating. But before someone could alert a station attendant... a mystery heroine rushed in like a whirlwind and gave those delinquents a taste

of their own medicine.”

“You don’t mean...” Nagase whispered.

“Indeed, it was your very own Kiriyama Yui-san.”

Kiriyama beat up a bunch of delinquents?!

“These delinquents you mentioned... Just checking, but... they were male, right?” Taichi asked.

“Why, Yaegashi-kun, I’m impressed! How very feminist of you to not assume the delinquents were men by default! That said, given the context, I’d say that much was implied. Yes, the delinquents Kiriyama-san fought off were all male.”

Kiriyama fought a group of men?

Kiriyama, as in, the girl who used to have such bad androphobia she couldn’t even touch a guy without trembling in fear?

While she’d made tremendous progress on overcoming her phobia in recent weeks, there was no way in hell she could have managed that!

“And?” Inaba asked, her expression perfectly composed.

“Well... She would’ve been fine if she’d stopped there, but evidently she lost control of her temper and went a little overboard. At that point, other Akitaka students saw their friends getting trounced and decided to jump in... and things went about as you’d expect. Kiriyama-san ended up taking out something like six guys.”

Taichi could practically see it—pint-sized Kiriyama flying around the station like an angry hawk, landing one karate kick after another.

“Even if they all deserved it, she was still acting out of line, so the police took her down to the station to hear her side of the story... Oh, did you hear ‘police custody’ and think she was arrested? No, that’s just the term they use when dealing with minors. Little bit of trivia for you. Anyway, you’d think that’s where the story ends... but unfortunately, a new challenger appeared on the scene.”

“Aoki?” Inaba asked.

“You guessed it. I don’t know the details, but I’m told he flew into a blind

rage, yelling at the police ‘Where are you taking her?! Give her back!’ and such. Frankly, I didn’t realize he had it in him. Anyway, that’s how Aoki ended up going with her.”

Aoki was the comic relief of the group. He wouldn’t hurt a fly. On the contrary, he was the sort of person who could keep a level head in a crisis... or so Taichi had believed...

“Anyway, I wouldn’t be too worried if I were you. They’ll probably be fine. After all, it’s not like they had ill intentions. They’ll probably get a slap on the wrist, if that. And because they were both trying to protect a fellow Yamaboshi student, I can’t imagine the school will take disciplinary action against them. I mean, as far as the student body is concerned, Kiriama-san is a vigilante hero. They’d almost certainly revolt if she saw punishment. But above all...” Fujishima paused to shoot Inaba a knowing look.

“...The school knows I’d never accept it, and I’d go to any lengths to make them reverse their decision.” Inaba finished with a smirk.

“I thought as much. But if it truly does come to that, I think I can be of some assistance. I have a few cards up my sleeve.”

Yamaboshi’s two biggest schemers began to snigger conspiratorially. Frankly, it was terrifying.

“Oh yeah, one other thing. I’m just wondering... Where did you get this information?” asked Inaba. “Was a friend of yours at the scene or something? You seem pretty confident in its accuracy.”

“No, no. My father just so happens to be a high-ranked police officer, that’s all. I can convince him to vouch on their behalf, if need be,” Fujishima answered casually. Taichi wasn’t sure what was more impressive—her father’s job, or the fact that she could manipulate his influence to her advantage.

“Well now... That’s good to know. Sounds like a very useful connection indeed,” Inaba grinned, rubbing her palms together like some kind of shady black market dealer.

“Feel free to make use of it anytime you like—within reason, of course. And not for free, obviously, but I’ll let you have a discount.”

“Why, thank you kindly...”

The two shared mischievous snickers amongst themselves once more. An eerie vibe emanated from the pair, keeping all onlookers at bay; Taichi could practically feel his hair standing on end.

Just then, the bell rang.

After first period ended, Taichi walked over to Inaba’s desk, where she sat with her arms folded and her eyes closed.

“Hey, uh... Thanks for what you did back there.”

She opened one eye to look at him. “Back where?”

“Earlier this morning? You know, when you... held me back?”

He couldn’t bring himself to go into more detail than that, lest he be forced to admit what his body had been trying to do... and he refused to concede that he’d actually felt that impulse.

“By any chance, did you hear a **[voice]** in your head at the time?” she asked, and Taichi sucked in a breath.

Yes, he had certainly heard a **[voice]**. It was just before the mystery impulse had overpowered his rational mind and taken control of his body. And full, willful control at that—far more than a mere subconscious reflex.

“Yeah, actually, I did. How did you know? Did everyone else hear it, too?”

“No, idiot. I said *in your head*. And I know because... because the same thing happened to me during... you know.”

“So it happened the same way for you, too? Like, you heard a **[voice]**, and then your body started acting on its own...?”

She nodded quietly.

At this point, it was obvious what was happening. Once again, they were slowly being torn away from their ordinary lives. And Taichi had a horrible feeling he knew where this was headed.

Inaba sighed. “We don’t know exactly what’s going on yet, and I might just be

overthinking this... but just in case, we should be prepared for the worst.” Her tone was one of grave resignation.

“Right.”

“For now, we should hold a club meeting today so we can discuss this. Hopefully Yui and Aoki will be back by the time school lets out. If not, well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it... Hmph. It’s not every day I pray to God I’m *wrong* about something, but here we are...”

“Yeahhh...”

“But for the time being, I guess that’s all we can do. Just... pray.”

Unfortunately, coming from an aggressively ambitious girl whose motto was “maintain total control of the situation at all times,” the sentiment felt disturbingly mismatched. It just wasn’t like her.



Once again, it had struck without warning.

Well... Okay, to be fair, there was some... noticeable weirdness. If that counted as a warning, then so be it. But the warning struck without warning, and it was kind of a crappy warning at that.

They had no way of fighting it.

They thought they had escaped this hell, but clearly they had not.

After all, they had no say in the matter.

They were trapped.

Merely playthings to be toyed with.

That was their fate.

Because that’s just how the story goes, isn’t it?

Their desires were irrelevant. Utterly inconsequential.

Taichi knew that.

“Oh... This is «Heartseed»... Well, I guess that was obvious... Wasn’t it?” asked the being that turned up in Rec Hall Room 401, wearing the body of their class

advisor and club supervisor, Gotou Ryuuzen. “Anyway... Long time no see, everyone... Well, I guess it hasn’t been *that* long... or has it?”

As usual, its expression carried about as much verve as a corpse as it droned on, uninterested in any response they might have had.

It was the first time they’d seen it since about three weeks ago, when it led them to believe that Nagase Iori would die—too distant to feel recent, yet too fresh to be considered a thing of the past. Had it been a long time? It was hard to say. All Taichi knew for certain was that he’d never wanted to encounter this thing ever again.

And it quickly became apparent that he wasn’t the only one.

“I gotta say, I sure never wanted to have to see your stupid face again after last time, «Heartseed», you miserable little cockroach,” Inaba growled. Even a non-human entity wasn’t enough to cow her into silence.

Ultimately, Kiriya and Aoki never turned up for school that day. No official statement was made, but according to Fujishima, the two received no formal punishment beyond a phone call to their parents. Seeing as they didn’t turn up, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba were forced to hold the club meeting without them... but then «Heartseed» had to appear.

As usual, it had chosen to possess [Gotou’s body]... and now they were all standing mere steps apart.

Well, not all of them. Inaba had chosen to remain sitting.

“So what the fuck are you doing back here? Didn’t you tell us to forget you ever existed or whatever?”

“Oh... That *does* sound familiar... Frankly, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t think about it too hard... Then again... The last time we saw each other, I seem to recall I also said I’d ‘see you again’ or something to that effect... Hmm... You have a photographic memory, don’t you, Inaba-san? Do you remember?”

“Go fuck yourself!” Inaba slammed her fist down on the brand-new table.

«Heartseed» was the ultimate mastermind behind the body-swap phenomenon. It called itself a mere observer, then turned around and used that

title as an excuse to justify doing basically whatever it felt like. Its true identity was unknown, and they had no way of finding out more.

“What are you doing here? I... didn’t exactly miss you...” Nagase mumbled, unable to keep the nerves out of her voice despite her best efforts. And for good reason; if anyone had severe feelings toward «Heartseed», it was her. After all, it nearly killed her.

“Oh... Come to think of it, I still haven’t apologized to you directly... I sincerely regret what took place... from the middle-ish of my heart... so yeah... I’m sorry...”

“You think your apology means anything to me at this point?! It doesn’t! Nngh... If you actually regret what you did, then stay away from us! Leave us alone!”

Damn right, Taichi thought.

“I can’t do that... I don’t know how many times I have to say this, but... you’re all just so fascinating... If anything, be mad that I noticed you... Oh, but ideally don’t be mad at me personally... I’d really prefer our time together to be enjoyable, after all...”

That last part sounded kind of like a threat... No, *a lot* like a threat.

“Hold it! Are you trying to say we’ll be spending *even more* time with you?!” Inaba cut in, panicked.

“Well, yes... This is round two, so I’m going to need you to entertain me again... No telling what will happen from here, but... Eh, this should be enough to get the ball rolling in the right direction, I think...”

“Wait... What do you mean, entertain you?” Taichi asked, his voice shaking.

“Hmm...? Haven’t you figured it out, Yaegashi-san? Haven’t you noticed a strange voice in your head, or felt your body moving of its own accord?”

Goosebumps prickled up on his arms. All at once, their beloved clubroom felt cold and alien, like they’d been pulled into a different world entirely.

“You son of a bitch! What, so this time you think you can just... control our bodies like puppets?! Is that it?!” Inaba raged.

“Control you? Don’t be silly, Inaba-san... I would never do that... That would defeat the purpose entirely...” It sighed. “In that case... While I’m here to give my advance notice, I suppose I’ll give you a brief explanation as well... Mm, I’m so thoughtful...”

“Advance notice? Explanation? For *what*?” Nagase whispered, trembling.

“Well, you *do* need an explanation for all this, don’t you...? Ah, but... then again, it strikes me as kind of fascinating to see you all panicking without one... But that’s not what I’m after right now... As for the advance notice, well... I notice we’re missing two of you at the moment... so I figure I’ll save the full explanation for when you’re all present and accounted for...”

“Why us? Why again?” Nagase choked. Judging from her expression, she had already resigned herself to her fate.

“Like I keep telling you, you’re all just so fascinating... How many times must I repeat myself...? Ugh... I’m so tired of this... Maybe I shouldn’t explain it... Then again, I’m already here... It feels like a waste to head straight back... Ugh... It’s so much effort to think about all this... Why don’t all of you decide for me? Which would you prefer?”

“For starters, we’ll hear you out, I guess... Then we’ll go from there,” Inaba replied, sounding a bit calmer as she ran a hand through her hair in frustration.

“Great... Thanks. So, just to briefly explain... It’s nothing too complicated, really... In fact, I think you all might enjoy it... Oh... Well... Okay, maybe that’s overstating it a bit... Where was I...? Oh, right... So, put simply, I’m going to liberate the innermost desires that dwell within your hearts...”

“Liberate... our desires...?” As the words left Taichi’s lips, memories flashed through his mind—memories of the recent antics between the five of them.

Inaba’s seduction... Kiriya’s fury... Nagase’s over-eager phone call... and his own uncontrollable wrath...

“Precisely... I call it ‘Liberation’ for short... Oh, wait... That’s not much shorter, I guess... Oh well... It doesn’t matter... Anyway... as you can imagine... humans bear countless ‘desires’ at any given time... and all of you are no exception... However, not all of them are plain to see... Not all of them are expressed in

one's behavior... After all, rational thought and other such mental fetters exist to hold them back... but that's kind of unfortunate, don't you think?"

Uninterested in their response, «Heartseed» continued. "Unable to do what you want... Forced to conceal your heart's true desire... Is this how humans are meant to live...? Oooh... That's kind of deep..."

"You can't always get what you want. That's not how the world works, dipshit," Inaba scoffed.

"Well... Ordinarily, yes... but that's precisely why I think it might be interesting for you to give it a try..." In contrast to the gravity of the situation, «Heartseed's tone was light and casual. "So I'll just Liberate you a teensy bit... Set you free..."

Set us free?

"You're insane. Don't you see how dangerous that is? The moment we start acting purely on instinct, we're no better than animals," Inaba spat.

"Ah... I had a feeling you'd point that out, Inaba-san... You're exactly right. If a human were to unleash their every desire, all hell would break loose... Hence, I'll be Liberating just one at a time, entirely at random... There are so many to choose from, after all... Hunger, lust, sloth, greed, ambition... other stuff... I forget what else..." «Heartseed» rambled on, looking utterly bored. "Oh, but I think the desire that gets Liberated will typically be whichever one you feel the strongest at that given moment... Well, human desires are always fluctuating... and each one has differing degrees of intensity..."

Taichi stood stock-still, utterly baffled.

"So... do you all have a general understanding of what we're doing this time around...? I'm going to assume you do..." There «Heartseed» paused, and a brief silence descended upon the room. Then he continued, "I was thinking maybe I should explain a little more, but... seeing as this is just my advance notice, I think we can stop here for today... We're still missing two people, after all... Yes... Good idea... Let's stop here. I should save the full explanation for when you're all together... though ultimately I can do it whenever I want... Oh, and please do pass on this information to the two absentees for me... Ugh... So much effort..."

“Why the hell are you fucking with us like this?! Just tell us what you want from us!” Inaba snapped. Evidently she’d well and truly had it with «Heartseed»’s enigmatic manner of speech.

“Ah... I see... In that case, I’ll be going now... I’ll see you again soon... Tomorrow after school, perhaps...”

“*Answer me!*” she roared.

“Tomorrow... after school...?” Taichi muttered helplessly.

“Yes... Like I said, today was just an advance notice... Ideally I would have liked to get it all over with today, but... two of you were missing, so... I’ll just have to come back tomorrow... I *did* consider not turning up today at all, but... I hate having to cancel my plans... so I decided to show up anyway... Besides, I knew it was the safer option...”

“They’re ‘missing’ because of *your* stupid Liberation shit,” Inaba hissed.

“Don’t be silly... This is hardly my fault... I just thought... if I don’t hurry up and let them know... it might end too quickly... That’s the whole reason I came... I’d rather things don’t end prematurely, you know...? Now, I know what you’re thinking: ‘In that case you should have told us beforehand,’ but, well... it can be rather entertaining to watch you people get all flustered at the start...”

Evidently its goal was still to “watch” their “entertaining” behavior... but the significance of those words was still unclear.

“Anyway, see you...” With that, «Heartseed» headed for the door... then stopped short. “Wait... Upon further reflection... No one promised me they’d pass on the information to the other two... But I think it’s safe to assume one of you will do so... Perhaps Inaba-san with her perfect memory? I’d appreciate it...”

For a moment the entire room froze as Inaba glared back at «Heartseed». Then, balling her fists, she opened her mouth to speak. “And what if I say no?”

“I think that’ll just make things worse for yourselves...”

“And *that* will make things worse for *you*.”

She was trying her hardest to back «Heartseed» into a corner. *How does she*

have the mental composure for that?

But while Inaba looked visibly tense, «Heartseed» didn't even quirk a brow. "Wow... You're so mean... You know I don't have the energy to go find them... Ugh... I guess I'll have to put everything on pause for now..."

"The fuck does that even mean?!"

"Well... I was thinking... I could make an exception just this once... and purposely set it so Liberation won't strike... between now and when I see you all tomorrow."

"Why are you doing this...?" Nagase whimpered tearfully.

"Are you listening...? I said I'd put the Liberation phenomenon on pause until I finish explaining everything tomorrow... Like a free moment of respite... A rest stop... Aagh... I don't know how else to put it... and it doesn't even matter..."

"You can do that?" Inaba asked incredulously.

"Apparently... It's not exactly kosher on my end, I don't think... but it's better than having everything end prematurely... But most of all... it seems like it would be fun to try, just once... Anyway, I'll see you again... tomorrow, same time, same place... or maybe not... See you sometime."

With that, «Heartseed» left the clubroom.

No one tried to stop him—no one *could*.

After «Heartseed» left, a long silence fell over the room.

Then, finally, Inaba spoke. "Again...?" she muttered.

Meanwhile, the other two were still at a loss for words.

Taichi didn't have the first clue what to do, or how to even react to this. He always knew there was a slight possibility... No, more than slight. After all, it had already happened once. But deep down, he'd hoped they'd never have to go through anything as surreal as the body-swap ever again.

Unfortunately, it seemed this supernatural entity known as «Heartseed» had it out for them.

“Why...?”

Nagase barely seemed to register that she’d spoken out loud.

The word spun around and around inside Taichi’s head. *Why? Why? Why?*

Was there any way they could have avoided this? Sadly, the answer was no. And it was crushing.

“Okay, uh... Anyone have any ideas on how we can circumvent this shit?” Inaba asked.

Neither of them had an answer.

“Figured as much. I’m coming up empty myself.”

They’d attempted to brainstorm countermeasures during the body-swap, too—only to realize there really weren’t any. And without any new hints to go on, there was simply no way of gaining the upper hand.

“Do we just have to... accept it?” Nagase whispered.

“There’s gotta be something... Something we can do... Personally, I’m gonna keep thinking. But right now...”

Both Nagase and Inaba looked utterly despondent.

Taichi was feeling pretty shattered himself... but he knew he had to say something.

“We survived it last time, didn’t we? So we’ll survive it again... somehow!” he quickly added as he realized he had no real basis for his statement. It came out sounding so stupid, however, that he hastily continued, “What I mean is... We need to *believe* that we can survive this. I know we shouldn’t look too lightly on the situation, but despairing about it won’t help us either... Again, I’m not saying we should be too optimistic—!”

As he struggled to find the right words, Nagase and Inaba burst out laughing.

“C-Could you guys not laugh at me right now?!”

“Look, dumbass, I get what you’re going for, but do you have to be so goddamn awkward about it?”

“You coulda pulled it off if you’d had a little more confidence... Too bad.”

“Gee, sorry I didn’t meet your *standards*, then!”

“Hmph... Oh well. Apparently that thing has more it wants to tell us... and allegedly it’s put the whole phenomenon on pause or whatever... Maybe you’re right. Maybe all we can do for right now is tell ourselves that we’ll be fine.” Inaba folded her arms with a sigh.

“It all starts tomorrow, once «Heartseed» comes back... Now that we know it’s coming, maybe we should set up some sort of ambush,” Nagase suggested half-jokingly.

“What, like a booby trap?” Inaba retorted.

Their quiet laughter filled the room... and that was all it took to breathe life back into the world around them.

“Alright. It all goes down tomorrow. I’ll let Yui and Aoki know. Seeing as nothing will happen for the next 24 hours or so, I say we all go home and rest up... Ugh, that makes it sound like I’m looking forward to it...” Inaba grumbled.

And so club activities ended for the day.

But Taichi didn’t get much sleep that night.



The next day, as expected, KiriYama Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi were let off without a formal punishment.

After first period let out, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba met up with Aoki in the hallway. He seemed a bit tired, but otherwise no worse for wear.

“I’m sorry for worryin’ you guys,” he said, lowering his head in a bow.

“No need to apologize. You weren’t the one we were worried about, anyway.”

“Wow, rude enough?! Would it kill you to be nice to me for once, Inabacchan?!” Aoki was back from the front lines, and yet Inaba showed no signs of sympathy. “Then again... I know you’re just treatin’ me the same as always so I won’t feel weird... Maybe that’s just how you show your love!”

“Whoa there, buddy... That sure is positive thinking, alright... Even I wouldn’t

go *that* far...” Nagase leaned away from him awkwardly.

So that’s how it is... Anyone who was genuinely worried for this overly optimistic dumbass would just end up looking stupid anyway... I should try to remember that.

“Anyway... You okay, dude?” Taichi asked.

“Yeah, I’m totally fine! Thanks. It was no big deal, really.” Aoki grinned. Despite the recent whirlwind of events—despite everything Inaba had told him over the phone about the return of «Heartseed»—he seemed just as cheerful as always.

I wish I could do that, Taichi thought.

But then, Aoki’s face fell. “I’m a little worried about Yui, though.”

Their expressions darkened.

Kiriyama hadn’t turned up at school that day, either.



Sure enough, «Heartseed» turned up at their clubroom after school that day, just as it had promised. Once again, it was piloting the body of their class advisor and club supervisor, Gotou Ryuuzen.

Although they’d known in advance it was coming, they hadn’t thought of any countermeasures. They’d barely even managed to prepare themselves emotionally.

“Oh... I see we’re still missing Kiriyama-san... Oh well... I don’t feel like waiting any longer... Just pass the message on to her at some point later, if you would... And here I was trying to make sure everyone could be present for my explanation... What a waste of effort... Anyway... Do you remember what we discussed yesterday? I feel like I went over the basic rundown, at least... You have a photographic memory, don’t you, Inaba-san? What do you think?”

Inaba grimaced, then quickly pulled herself together and turned to face «Heartseed».

“You said our desires will be ‘Liberated’ at random—usually whichever one is strongest at that moment. Hah... So you’re not fucking with our heads or

controlling our bodies. Instead you're gonna mess around with our hearts? Disgusting."

"Oh... Good... Sounds like I explained it fairly well... But... 'mess around with your hearts'...? I'm insulted... While I might chemically alter your inhibition levels, I would never forcibly strengthen, weaken, or change your desires outright... If anything, I'm just setting you free... Depending on how you look at it, this might even help you discover your true selves... After all, even your most subliminal desires will be affected..."

"Setting us free...? Our true selves...?" Nagase mumbled to herself.

"How do I put it...? I take the Liberated desire and give it absolute authority over your body... so much that you cannot fight it... and then that desire reveals the person you are on the inside... Not to repeat myself, but just to be clear, I'm not meddling with your heart or the desires themselves... Everything you do while Liberated is something you yourself wanted to do in the first place..."

"That doesn't make it fucking okay! So you're telling me if I were to get pissed off, like, 'Fuck, I wanna kill this asshole!' and then this stupid Liberation shit kicks in, I might actually straight up murder someone?"

Murder.

With this logic carried to its extreme, it was entirely possible.

A faint shiver ran down Taichi's spine—a different kind of fear.

But «Heartseed» didn't even blink.

"Interesting... So you're the sort of person who contemplates murder whenever someone makes you the slightest bit angry... How creepy..." it mused aloud.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm just saying... That would only happen if you sincerely wanted to... So you must have a lot of homicidal urges knocking around in there..."

"It... It was just a hypothetical question! I don't *actually* want to kill anyone, obviously...!"

"Right, of course not... After all, *most people* aren't boiling with bloodlust

every minute of every day...”

Gritting her teeth, Inaba balled her hands into fists. It seemed even she couldn't outsmart «Heartseed». Even with all the “advance notice” in the world, there was simply nothing any of them could do.

“Okay... I don't want you all to get the wrong idea, so I guess I'll explain a little further... Liberation won't cause you to go on some kind of crazy rampage, alright...? Nothing like that will happen unless you sincerely want to do it...”

“Crazy rampage... Are you talkin' 'bout Yui?” Aoki asked coldly.

“Am I...? Who knows...”

“Quit dickin' me around, pal!” Aoki started to rise from his chair, but Inaba stopped him.

“Look... Aren't we *meant* to control our impulses? Isn't that what makes us human?” she asked «Heartseed».

It paused for a moment, its expression as stoic as ever. Was it trying to think? It wasn't clear.

“Says who...?”

Touché.

“Do humans often wish to kill another, but their common sense hides it below the surface...? Or do humans only *think* they want to kill someone, when in actuality that desire is much, much rarer...? I hope for your sake it's the latter... Otherwise things could get sticky...”

This was murder they were talking about—the greatest sin of all. *Sticky* was an understatement. Not only would it destroy their friendship, it would destroy their entire lives outside the club.

“I guess we'll just have to find out...”

“*Fuck you!* We're not your goddamn guinea pigs!”

“Ugh... Please stop shouting, Inaba-san... It won't help you... Please just accept that this is how things are going to work... and try your best... And as for me, I'll do my best to observe you... Once things get nice and interesting, it'll

end eventually...”

“Fuck you...” Inaba repeated weakly. Evidently she was starting to come to terms with it.

“Oh, one more thing... When your desires are unleashed... You may hear a **[voice]** in your head... Think of it as your true self crying out to be heard... It’s a sort of side effect of the Liberation... Don’t worry about it... Ugh... I’m so tired of talking...” «Heartseed» muttered. “Okay, well... I feel like I’ve said everything I needed to say... or have I...? Oh well... Any questions? For once I’m actually willing to entertain your concerns for a moment...”

“...You’re not going to add the body-swap back in later or some shit like that, are you?” Inaba asked after a small pause.

Oh. Right. Taichi hadn’t thought of that.

“No, that won’t be happening... After all, it’s already over.”

“Hmph. Is that so? I find that a little hard to believe, since you’re in [Gotou’s body] right now. Clearly you’re still capable of it.”

The others could only watch as Inaba continued to argue with the supernatural entity like it was nothing.

“Ah, I see... You’re right... Truth be told, using this fellow is simply more convenient... I have other methods, but... this one is the easiest.” «Heartseed» patted its own—or rather, [Gotou’s]—chest.

“Right, right. God forbid anything be hard for you... Haah... I guess there really is no beating you...”

“Well... I imagine it would be akin to you ‘beating’ a natural disaster...”

What an apt comparison.

“And let me guess: you say it’s all random chance, but the truth is, you can control it at will, can’t you?”

“If I said no, I doubt you would believe me... so I’ll say yes. But for the most part it’ll be at random, so don’t worry... Oh, right... That’s not much in the way of reassurance...”

“Uggghhh! God *damn* it! What the fuck is wrong with you, you psychopath?! You really piss me the fuck off, you know that? You act like you’re gonna ‘entertain our concerns’ but you won’t even tell us who the fuck you are! Fuck yourself!” Inaba bit her fingernail and glared venomously at «Heartseed».

“I feel like I keep having to say this, but... You should try not to think too hard about these things... I would really appreciate it if you could just accept your reality... and move on to brainstorming what actions you all should take... It’s for the best... for all of us... I mean, we both want this to end as quickly as possible, yes...?”

“One more question.”

“...Go ahead... I’m feeling charitable today...”

“Is there a rule against isolating ourselves?”

Taichi didn’t understand where she was going with that question, but judging from her voice, it was critical.

«Heartseed»’s lips curled in a faint, eerie smile. The sight of it made Taichi’s skin crawl.

“I see... You truly are a smart cookie, Inaba-san... I’m probably better off not answering those sorts of questions... but I’ll answer anyway, out of respect for you...”

They were playing some sort of mental chess with each other, and Taichi couldn’t even begin to follow it.

“I’ll say this... It sounds interesting... Alternatively, if need be, I can... make it interesting.”

“Hmph... You’re such a dick,” Inaba spat, arms folded.

“Say whatever you like... it won’t change anything... Can I go now...? Yes? Off I go, then... Homeward bound... Ugh... I can’t believe I put in all this effort two days in a row... Maybe I’m improving... Don’t you think I’m improving...? Oh, right... There’s no point asking you... Now then, let’s see... Yes, the moment I take my leave of here, the Liberation will resume...”

The Liberation will resume.

This was their last chance.

“...Hey, wait!” Taichi called out at the last moment, upon finally finding his voice.

“...Did you need something, Yaegashi-san? I get the feeling you don’t.” «Heartseed»’s dull, lifeless, half-lidded eyes seemed to look straight through him, and he froze like a deer in headlights. It felt like he was staring into the void.

He couldn’t think. He couldn’t speak.

“Didn’t think so... I’ll be going now...”

Show up, drop a bombshell, and leave. That was the «Heartseed» way. And they had no choice but to let it happen.

But just as it was about to walk out the door, Inaba called out to it.

“You wanna know something about natural disasters? It’s true that *most* people might run and hide... but if you think 100% of humanity is like that, you’ve got another thing coming.”

She grinned and flipped the bird.

“...Yes, I know... Now then... Best of luck to you all.”

And with that, the door clicked shut behind it.



Taichi and the others sat collapsed in their folding chairs.

Now that «Heartseed» was gone, it felt like a vicious hurricane had swept into the room and destroyed everything they held dear, sparing only their lives. They knew they needed to do *something*, but what?

They were so naive to think that it was over. No, it had only just begun. And now they would have to endure yet another supernatural phenomenon for who knows how long.

Are we sure we can handle this? Taichi asked himself.

Could they survive the storm without anyone getting hurt... ideally himself included?

He knew it wouldn't be easy. He could feel it in his bones.

For a while, no one spoke. They probably needed time to think as much as he did.

"Tch... I knew that thing was coming, but I still couldn't do a damn thing..." Inaba grumbled finally.

"No, I think you did great... I mean, personally, I froze up completely," Taichi muttered as the memory of [Gotou] «Heartseed» floated through his mind. His heart was still pounding hard. Something about that unspeakable, unearthly presence was so... viscerally repulsive.

"...We all agreed Inaban would be the one to do the talking... though I get the feeling it would've happened either way..." Nagase laughed weakly.

"Yeah... I kinda lost my cool back there... Sorry, guys. It's just... when it comes to Yui, I..." Aoki's voice petered out.

"It's not your fault. I guess... our only choice is to accept it." There was a quiet warmth in Inaba's voice.

"I guess so... It's a little late now, but... does anyone have any other ideas...?" Nagase mumbled.

No one said a word.

Taichi had spent all of yesterday and today trying to think of ways to counteract the phenomenon. He even contemplated skipping school and going somewhere far, far away. But somehow he just couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger. How could any of them even escape when they were dealing with the sort of entity that could possess their bodies at will?

"If last time is anything to go by, this should only last for about a month... I think all we can do at this point is grit our teeth and bear it," Inaba answered quietly. "Something tells me we just can't escape that thing."

"So we got no choice..." Aoki muttered.

For a moment, a heavy silence descended upon the clubroom... Then Taichi shattered it.

"Let's do it."

Taichi knew he was mostly powerless, and at times his fears threatened to crush him into paste—but nevertheless, he had spent all of yesterday gearing up for today. If running away wasn't an option, then his only choice was to confront it head-on and limit the damage as much as possible.

Because that's how you weather the storm.

Nagase clapped her palms to her cheeks, as if to snap herself out of her funk. Then she looked around the room with determination in her eyes. "Let's do this, guys!"

They nodded. They all knew what they had to do.

From there, it was Inaba who took control.

"Alright then... Real quick, let's get the facts in order. What we know about the phenomenon is... well, that fucker already told us everything, so we've got that covered, I guess. As for Yui, I'll talk to her myself later. The first thing we should try to figure out is what exactly this 'Liberation' does to us."

"I've been thinking... maybe the incident at the station..." Nagase glanced hesitantly in Aoki's direction.

"Nngh... Yeahhh... When I saw them takin' Yui away, I... I remember thinkin' 'Don't you dare!'... I mean, you know Yui's condition! She was scared witless surrounded by all those dudes! And then I heard this **[voice]** in my head... and after that I kinda lost my temper... Always thought there was somethin' weird about it..."

As Aoki fell silent, Inaba piped up. "Yui must have thought 'I want to protect that girl, even if it means I have to fight those men.' And you must have thought 'I want to protect Yui, even if it means getting in trouble with the cops.' *Normally* common sense would have kicked in at that point, but..."

"But you were both Liberated, so you went through with it," Nagase finished.

"Yeah... I guess that musta been what happened. Sorry, guys."

"No, no, it's not your fault."

"Then... do you think maybe the reason Kiriyama broke the table the other day was because she thought to herself 'I demand to know what's going on,

even if it means I have to make a scene’?” asked Taichi.

Inaba nodded. “Yeah. Conversely, I imagine ‘making a scene’ was as far as she went. I wish I could say for sure, but, well... it makes sense, if that fuckhead is to be believed.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“What I mean is, Yui didn’t think to herself ‘I’ll punch them if I have to.’ Maybe she knew she didn’t need to go that far, or maybe she would have escalated if the table thing didn’t work. It’s hard to say.”

“Right...” Taichi nodded.

According to «Heartseed», this “Liberation” would simply force them to act on the desires lurking deep down inside. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Wait... So when you tried to climb on top of m—”

“HYAH!” Inaba promptly karate chopped him in the throat.

“GGHH?!” Taichi began to sputter and choke. “Th... That really hurt, damn it...!”

“Fuck off! Maybe that’ll teach you to shut the fuck up, you fucking clod! Have some common fucking decency, would you?! Don’t go parading my shame around in front of everyone! Just forget it! Or do you need me to beat it out of your thick skull?!” She was so furious, she had completely lost her composure. Was she Liberated...? No, it didn’t seem that way.

“Oh yeahhh... Come to think of it, we never really got to the bottom a’ that, did we? Taichi, you’d better explain—Oh, wait, maybe not in front of Iori-chan...” Aoki managed to catch himself, but by then it was already far, far too late.

“Ummm... What’s this about Inaban climbing on top of Taichi...?” Nagase asked, head tilted quizzically.

“See?! Now look what you’ve done, dipshit! You stupid asshole!”

“S-Sorry...” Taichi hung his head in shame.

“Yeah, well, if ‘sorry’ could fix all the world’s problems, we wouldn’t need the

cops, now would we?”

“Uh, guys? Can someone clue me in here?”

“Nngh... Look, just don’t tell anyone, alright?! ...A couple days ago, me and Taichi were alone in the clubroom, and I... I kinda tried to climb on top of him... But nothing ended up happening, okay?! We barely even touched each other! And then Yui and Aoki shown up. Showed up!”

Inaba was so nervous she was stumbling over her words, but Taichi didn’t even crack a smile. He nodded along desperately.

“O-Oh... Gotcha... So what made you wanna do that? ...Wait, don’t answer that. I don’t wanna pry. Sorry! Forget I asked!”

“No, it’s fine! I don’t want you to think I’m some kind of perpetually horny slut or whatever! At the time, I was browsing around online, and I accidentally... clicked on a porn website.”

The three of them froze, staring blankly. Taichi tried his best not to laugh.

“Look, I... I don’t know how far I would’ve gone, but... p-probably nothing too crazy, okay? Not like I have any experience, anyway...” Inaba’s face was now so flushed, Taichi was too embarrassed to look her in the eye. Instead, he vowed never to make mention of that incident again so long as he lived.

Meanwhile, Nagase and Aoki stood side by side, knowing looks on their faces, hands clasped together in quiet prayer.

May we all soon forget Inaba’s greatest shame.

“Ahem.” Inaba cleared her throat, and everyone hastily straightened up. “Anyway, as I was saying... Basically, once we’re Liberated, it becomes a matter of what exactly we want to do and how badly we want to do it—possibly even on a subconscious level... Ugh, I can’t believe it’s gonna fuck around with our subconscious... This sucks...”

“As long as we’re aware of the desire we can reasonably predict the outcome, but if it’s subconscious then it’s harder to anticipate, right?” asked Nagase.

“Precisely. This is just my speculation, so take it with a grain of salt, but... I think we can expect it to affect the really ridiculous ones, too. The sort of

irrational subconscious desires that our common sense would reject on the spot,” Inaba continued. As usual, she was one step ahead of the rest of them.

“Uggghhh... All that ‘subconscious’ talk is flying right over my head, but it sounds hecka dangerous... I mean, I already caused a scene back at the train station...” Aoki moaned.

“Our innermost desires... Our hearts... Our true selves...” Nagase whispered slowly, mulling it all over.

“Iori, I wouldn’t equate your inner desires with your true self if I were you. Anyway... Real talk, this is some serious shit. Way worse than the body-swap ever was.”

“I don’t know... I think the body-swap was pretty bad, all things considered,” Taichi replied.

“Put some thought into it, Taichi. Did the body-swap ever have adverse effects beyond the five of us?” She regarded him with a level gaze as she continued. “I know you know what I’m talking about. Just think about what you tried to do to Fujishima yesterday morning.”

Her words pierced his chest like a knife.

He’d heard a **[voice]**... and then the fever kicked in... and then he tried to...

He could feel himself start to sweat just thinking back on it.

Truth be told, he didn’t want to admit it. He wanted to believe it was all just a figment of his imagination. If he could forget it, he would in a heartbeat...

But there was no point in running from the truth.

And the truth was that he had attempted to hurt Fujishima Maiko.

He didn’t know how far he would have gone without Inaba there to stop him. Maybe he would have just shoved her, or grabbed her by the collar. There was no way to know for sure.

Ultimately, however, it didn’t change the fact that he had felt a violent impulse... and that knowledge weighed on him like a ton of bricks.

From there, Inaba continued to review what they'd learned, and together they discussed possible countermeasures. Admittedly, they were more prepared this time around than they had been for the body-swap... but the thought that they were already conditioned to surviving these supernatural phenomena was an unpleasant one, to say the least.

"...So, I'm thinking we have two options here," Inaba said after a moment of silence. "Either we try to suppress our emotions by choosing not to 'want' anything, or we just go hog-wild without holding ourselves back or overthinking it... Well, more accurately, I imagine we'll probably need to switch between the two as the need arises..."

"Whaddya mean, Inabacchan?" asked Aoki.

"Well... Keep in mind that this is just my hypothesis based on that asshole's explanation, so it might be bullshit, but here's how I see it. For the first one, you gotta will yourself not to react emotionally to anything. If you can make yourself completely zen, like a monk or something, then hypothetically that fuckface could Liberate you all it wants and it wouldn't matter."

She had a point. If they were being forced to act on their desires, then the easiest way to circumvent that would be to not have any desires in the first place. However...

"Won't that be kinda hard, though? «Heartseed» said it would even affect our subconscious... and I don't know about you, but I'm definitely not *that* zen," Nagase muttered with a frown.

"You're not wrong. Hence, the second option: choosing instead to pursue our desires full-throttle. My conjecture for this one is, if we've already satisfied our desires by the time Liberation strikes, then maybe nothing much will come of it."

"Oh, I get it... They sound like total opposites, but both of them would reduce our inner desires, right?" asked Taichi.

Inaba nodded. "In principle, yeah. The asshole said it himself: 'human desires are always fluctuating.' So clearly he's not referring to our long-term goals or ambitions here. And we've seen for ourselves that it tends to affect passing whims more than anything. So I reckon we might be able to control it

somewhat, as long as we're careful."

Thanks to Inaba, there was now a single ray of hope in the darkness. Its light was feeble at best, but to Taichi, it was so much better than nothing.

"That said, obviously neither option is completely foolproof. With option one, if you try to suppress yourself too much, you might explode. And with option two, the more you sate your desires, the more you run the risk that they start snowballing out of control."

"Nngh... So whadda we do?!" Aoki asked, clutching at his hair.

"Truth be told, I don't know," Inaba responded. Even she wasn't omniscient. "This is ultimately just a suggestion, but... keep them both in mind. It'll be one hell of a balancing act, but if you can manage it... try to go with the flow and pursue your desires while carefully letting go of any strong emotions."

"So... act normal, be ourselves, don't overthink things, but pay close attention?" asked Taichi.

"Sure. That's one way to paraphrase it, I guess. I'd say those are the main points... That said, I already know you go with the flow by default, Taichi."

"What? No I don't!"

...*Do I?*

Taichi tilted his head, puzzled. Inaba scoffed.

"If it gets bad—I'm talking *really* bad—it might be in our best interests to just act normally. No reagents, no explosion, after all. And overthinking might lead your train of thought down the wrong path... That said, you probably *should* think a little about some things... Gah! I'm just going around in circles!"

"No, no, this has been a huge help! You rock, Inaban! Your analytical skills are out of this world!" Nagase piped up with a smile.

Personally, Taichi was inclined to agree. Once again they had found themselves thrust into the midst of a supernatural crisis, and yet Inaba still managed to memorize every tiny detail «Heartseed» gave them and turn it into something they could use to their advantage. All that time dedicated to information gathering and analysis had clearly paid off.

“Yeah, yeah. Suck-up.”

“Oh, I know! We should all try to cover for each other as much as we can. Like, if somethin’ bad happens to one of us, the rest of us should try to laugh it off. That’ll help keep us outta trouble, don’tcha think?” Aoki suggested.

“Definitely,” Taichi agreed.

“Plus, we got me an’ Yui in one class, and everybody else is in 1-C, so it works out perfectly! ...And I don’t mean that in a weird way!”

“Right. Yeah, that’s an option, I guess...” Inaba looked down at the table as if in thought.

“Hmm? You don’t like it, Inabacchan? Thought it was a pretty good idea myself...”

“No, that’s not it... It’s a fine idea. It certainly can’t hurt to cover for each other... Anyway. Guess that’s about it for today. It’s getting late, so let’s all head home. All that’s left is to roll with the punches and play it by ear.”

And so the four of them began to pack up their things.

They’d managed to come up with some semblance of a game plan, but Taichi’s anxiety still lingered. He took his time packing up, desperate to stay with the others as long as possible.

“Yui’ll prolly be back at school tomorrow, so we can just go from there,” said Aoki.

“Yeah... I’m not really sure what the right answer is, but... as long as we work together, I’m sure we’ll figure it all out. We got this,” Nagase replied with a soft, slightly awkward smile. After everything she went through last time, she had every right to be scared witless, and yet here she was, trying to be strong for everyone else.

Taichi shook away his internal whining. Their only choice was to move forward.

“Damn right. And I’ll be sure to do everything I can to get us through this,” he told them.

Whatever it takes to keep that smile on her face, he vowed silently.

“I’m counting on you, Taichi. I need you to be there for lori, too.”

His heart skipped a beat. Had Inaba read his mind?

“Oh, uh... sure thing. But not just her, of course! I’ll be here for all of y—”

“You just worry about yourself and lori, alright?” Inaba interrupted. “And Aoki, you look after Yui! Oh, wait... There’s no way in hell I can entrust her to you...”

“You talk smack now, Inabacchan, but you will surely rue the day you underestimated the power of love!”

“You make her sound like the villain here,” Taichi retorted.

“Wait... Inaban, where’s your stuff? Aren’t you heading out with us?” Nagase asked.

Inaba was the only one still seated.

“Huh? Oh, right... Well, we still need to turn in the damn Culture Bulletin. We were supposed to go over it together the other day, but...”

Oh, right. It had slipped Taichi’s mind entirely.

“Oh crap.” Evidently Nagase had forgotten, too. “Well, we kinda have more important stuff on our plate now...”

“Agreed. So yeah, no sense in all of us worrying about it. I’ll just look over it myself before I submit it to Gotou. Sound good?”

“I could help with that,” Taichi suggested.

“Me too! Oh, wait... I’m no good at nitpicky stuff... I could go buy drinks, though!” Aoki offered.

But Inaba shook her head. “I don’t need help. There’s just a few quick edits I want to make and then I’ll be done. Just *go home*, you dorks. Who knows what fresh hell awaits us tomorrow,” she replied, pushing them out the door with a rare, genuine smile on her face.

“What’s gotten into you, Inaban? You okay? You’re acting kind of weird...”

“It’s nothing for you to worry your pretty little head over, lori.”

And so the three of them left the clubroom.

Conflicted, Taichi turned back, but Inaba simply grinned and waved before summarily closing the door in his face.



She leaned back against the door, feeling the slight chill of the solid wood through her jacket.

After a brief conversation outside, Taichi, Iori, and Aoki had finally headed downstairs. But even though she knew they were gone, she remained rooted to the spot.

Silently, she began to count.

One... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten.

Then she slid down to the floor, where the cold linoleum greeted her through her skirt. She knew she was going to get her uniform all dirty, but she didn't care anymore. She couldn't take it.

"Did I do a good job...?" she whispered feebly to herself, her voice shaking with emotion. But the room was empty now, and there was no answer.

Her heart had shattered the instant «Heartseed» finished its full explanation of the phenomenon. The moment it all clicked in her head, she'd nearly had a breakdown. She wanted so badly to cling to someone and cry... but she knew she couldn't.

She was Inaba Himeko, and she had to be strong.

That was the version of her the others wanted her to be, and she wanted that for herself, too. She wanted to be strong for her own sake...

But unfortunately, that was looking next to impossible this time around.

"I hope they'll be okay..." she muttered, then scoffed derisively at herself.

As if I'm in any position to be worrying about them right now. Who am I kidding?

Hugging her knees to her chest, she curled into a ball. She could no longer feel the hard wooden door at her back; instead, all that remained was the faint

warmth of her own body heat.

Now that the clubroom was empty, the air felt so... *cold*.

“What do I do...?” she asked aloud, hoping to find some kind of solution, but in vain. There was nothing there to find but the silent void.

No one had an answer for her.

What if I just... stayed like this?

No sooner had the thought occurred to her than she shook her head dismissively.

“...I gotta get shit done.”

After all, Gotou might leave campus soon.

She let out a long breath, then put her hands on her knees and staggered to her feet.

I'll be fine. I can hold out a little longer.

And yet she found she lacked the energy to brush the dust from her skirt.



“Heya, Taichi. Got time for a chat?”

That night, Taichi was sitting in his room when his phone rang. It was Nagase.

Unlike last time, she seemed calm. Evidently she’d called of her own free will this time around.

“Oh, sure thing. I’m surprised you’re calling so late.”

“Yeah... Sorry... I just need to get this off my chest.”

“Totally fine. Go for it.”

Taichi tensed slightly. Her voice had a hardness to it; whatever it was she wanted to discuss, apparently it wasn’t pleasant. And now that «Heartseed» had shown its face again, anything was possible.

“It’s about... the thing we talked about last time I called.”

His heart skipped a beat, and his ears flushed red.

“O-Oh. That,” he stammered. It had caught him entirely off-guard.

The day before yesterday, they had reassured each other that they still had feelings for each other. And now there was more to it?

“I know we kinda have more important stuff to worry about... but I thought about it, and... this is important, too.”

Crap.

He should’ve been giving it more thought, but he’d put it off, what with all the chaos in their lives lately. It was too late for regrets, however.

They needed to take the next step, and he wanted to be the one to initiate it... but how? Was he better off just cutting straight to the point, like before? In the past, he’d sort of blurted his feelings out in the heat of the moment.

Maybe I should spice things up this time around? Or maybe it doesn’t matter? Oh god, I’m thinking too much and nothing’s coming to me!

Before he could make up his mind, however, Nagase spoke.

“Is it cool if we... maintain the status quo?”

“The... status quo...?” He hadn’t quite anticipated that.

“I don’t mean it in a bitchy way... I just think we should keep our distance for a bit, you know?”

“Keep our distance? As in, just stay friends?”

Was that really what she wanted?

“Oh, umm, not to give you the wrong idea or anything! I just mean for right now, that’s all!”

He didn’t quite understand where this was coming from. “Why?”

“Well, I mean... now that we’ve got «Heartseed» doing this weird ‘Liberation’ stuff to us, we’re not quite ourselves, you know? I just... I don’t think it’s a good idea to start a relationship in the middle of all that.”

She had a point. Once again, they were in the middle of a crisis. Truth be told, Taichi didn’t really comprehend just what «Heartseed»’s Liberation phenomenon was doing to them... and it would be foolish to make any

important life decisions while they already had so much on their plate. That much was obvious.

“You’re totally right... Sorry, I didn’t even think of that.”

“No need to apologize. Anyway, cool! Just wanted to put that out there. So if anything weird happens between us, let’s just agree to not take it too seriously.”

“Yeah, for sure. Things are kinda precarious for us right now. I mean, anything could happen.” He ran his free hand over his body. Nothing felt particularly out of place... but that only made it all the more uncomfortable. How many terrifying urges were lurking in there?

“Precarious... Yeah, definitely. Who knows what we might do... Listen, umm... I need to confess my sins.”

What am I, your priest?

“Uh, sure, go for it... Is it something I should be concerned about?” he asked.

“No, no. Technically it doesn’t involve you, but I just feel so guilty... Okay. Truth is, I just want to use you as an outlet so I can try to feel better about it. Sorry. Not super cool of me.”

“You’re not using me, silly. You can vent to me all you want and I’m more than happy to listen.”

That’s what being a boyfriend is all about, he thought, but couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“Thanks, Taichi... I really need this.”

“Lay it on me,” he replied casually.

“I’m just... I’m still so insecure, you know?”

Nagase hadn’t opened up about her fears in quite a while. She was constantly looking to others for approval and trying too hard to keep up all of her various outward personas to the point that she had now nearly lost sight of who she truly was. In the past, she’d told him she felt a lot better after talking to him about it, but evidently it wasn’t enough to wipe away her anxiety completely. Then again, that much was to be expected. It was a complicated issue, after all.

“I see...” He couldn’t hide the disappointment in his voice.

“Oh, but I’m doing way better than I was before, obviously! You’ve done so much to make me feel better about everything. Like, real talk? These days I’m starting to feel like I can actually be myself around everybody.”

“That’s good...”

“Yeah. Thank you so much! But... there are still times when I ask myself, ‘Am I sure this is what I want?’ So... I’m kinda looking forward to what «Heartseed» might do to me,” she explained in a hard voice.

He pictured the icy, mirthless expression he’d seen on her face a few times previously.

“Like, maybe this Liberation will dig up all my most suppressed desires, and then I’ll get to see the real me, not the edited version... I know that’s probably not how it works, but still... I just can’t help it. I’d do anything to find the person I was meant to be.”

Suppressed desires. The real, unedited version of oneself. Taichi didn’t have all the answers, but he understood what she was trying to say and why she felt the way she did.

“I really hate myself for thinking like that, you know? Liberation is dangerous—we know that for a fact after what happened to Yui and Aoki. I can’t stand how self-centered I am... but I can’t stop myself either...” she muttered.
“Anyway, confession time over! Sorry for babbling at you! I’ll buy you lunch sometime!”

As usual, she was quick to change tack. The darkness had left her voice entirely. But what was she really thinking?

Taichi struggled to think of something to say to her.

“Anyway, thanks for letting me keep you up. See you tomorrow.”

She’s gonna hang up! Say something! Anything!

He still hadn’t thought of anything valuable to contribute to the conversation, but his mouth was already moving.

“I feel like that’s an important part of who you are, though!”

“What?”

“W-Well, you know... You always try to look at things objectively, even when it comes to yourself. To me, that’s the real you!” he blurted desperately.

“Oh... umm... You think so?”

“Yeah... Pretty sure, anyway... I just think, you know, you’ll probably figure yourself out with time.”

She giggled. “You know, even when things get all crazy, as long as you’re around, I feel like everything will be okay... I’m gonna do my best to be more like you, I think. Anyway, see you.”

“Okay, see ya.”

With that, the call ended. Taichi closed his flip phone and set it down.

Something still didn’t sit quite right with him, but the more he tried to probe it, the further away understanding became.

“Forget it.” He jumped to his feet, walked over to the window, and opened it. A cool breeze rushed in, quickly negating the stuffy air inside. Beyond the window, the night sky had clouded over, with not a star to be seen.

What would the next day bring? What would happen? What would change?

They had decided to accept their fate, and so their battle would begin tomorrow. No, actually, technically it had already begun.

“We’ll be okay. I’ll make sure of it,” he muttered to himself before closing the window once more.

Chapter 3: Our New Normal

The next morning, Taichi debated skipping school.

He knew the moment he set foot outside, he would be crossing the threshold onto a dangerous battlefield. At the same time, however, he sensed that it would be potentially *more* dangerous to drag things out. Better to just get it over with and make it end as fast as possible.

According to «Heartseed», they were free to isolate themselves, but there was a chance doing so would only make things that much worse. Frankly, it wasn't clear whether isolation was even an option for them. After all, under the effects of this new Liberation phenomenon, the moment they felt the desire to go outside, their bodies would make it happen.

That said, isolation would certainly have its benefits, depending on the situation. And in fact, it was possibly the only effective countermeasure they had. But was it the right choice for someone like him—a guy with the tendency to overthink himself into a bottomless pit of despair?

How far would he fall? How deep would he sink? And what would he find down there?

There was no telling.

In which case, he was clearly better off having fun with everyone else. Maybe if he kept himself happy and content, he wouldn't have any weird urges.

Still, it was hard to gauge just how close he was allowed to get. Not close enough, and he knew he would want more—that much was patently obvious. But if he got too close, there was a chance he would want more regardless. That was just human nature. And right now, it was dangerous.

Ultimately, there was no safe route through this. No amount of careful consideration would lead him to an answer.

Maybe the solution, then, was simply to be a good person in general.

But was he actually a good person?



“Hey there, Yaegashi. I see you’ve finally decided to grace us with your presence.”

Yaegashi Taichi didn’t arrive at school that day until well into lunch period. There, in the hall, he encountered Watase Shingo, a fellow classmate who belonged to the Yamaboshi soccer team. With spiky hair and wolfish good looks, he was effortlessly popular with the girls—the envy of the class.

“Yeahhh... Something came up,” Taichi answered vaguely.

Truth be told, he was still a little baffled by what had happened this morning when he was Liberated.

“I gotta say, it’s not like you to come in late. And here I thought you were supposed to be the teacher’s pet.”

“What, because I do the bare minimum expected of me as a student?”

“Oh-*ho*! Listen to Mr. Valedictorian over here, talking big!” Watase snickered playfully. “Oh yeah, that reminds me... Man, you really missed out on something special. Your girl had a *big moment* earlier today! It was priceless!”

“My... girl?”

“You know, that girl in your club!”

“Who, Nagase?”

“Aha! So *she’s* the one you’re into!”

“Wh... Where’d that come from?!”

“Based purely on what I said, you had no way of knowing whether I meant Nagase or Inaba. But your first instinct was Nagase. *Bam.*”

“Nngh... You win...”

Though he wasn’t very good in school—mostly because he didn’t bother trying—Watase was actually surprisingly clever.

“Heh! That’s what you get for always dodging the question. Just be real with

me: who's the main squeeze and who's the side piece?"

"I told you, it's not like that!"

"Yeah, right. You've got both a model beauty and a total cutie wrapped around your little finger, and you're not gonna make a move on *either* of them? Nice try."

Granted, they were all pretty close—perhaps a bit closer than most guy-girl friendships—but in no way did he think they were "wrapped around his finger."

"Alright, well, now I know you've got your eye on Nagase. If you need any advice, just say the word and I'm your guy."

"I don't need your advice!" Taichi snapped, then paused. "Well... actually, I might..." he muttered sheepishly.

Watase raised his eyebrows in surprise, then chuckled and looked into the distance.

"Well, well. Looks like you're finally becoming a man... I gotta admit, after all the moments we've shared over the years, it really gets me right in the feels..."

"I've only known you for six months!"

"Pffhaha! Same difference! Anyway, I'mma stop by the cafeteria. You should go say hi to your sweetheart!"

"Please don't call her that... And don't go telling everyone about it, okay?!"

Watase lifted a hand in response as he headed down the hall; Taichi watched him go. Then, once Watase rounded the corner, Taichi sighed and leaned against the wall, gazing out through the windows.

"Ugh... Now I'm all weirdly nervous..." he mumbled to himself, quiet enough that he wouldn't be overheard. His heart was still thumping like crazy. What if he got Liberated right this very moment? He couldn't shake that fear from his mind. "Man, how am I supposed to survive the entire day like this...?"

Earlier that morning, he and the rest of the CRC had received an email from Inaba Himeko that read:

Treading with caution will be critical going forward. Regardless, let's all try to

be ourselves as much as possible. It'll be okay, guys. Just have faith in yourself.

And after the discussion they'd had yesterday, Taichi was inclined to agree.

He just needed to believe that his "normal self" would never think or act rashly.

Just gotta have faith.

"Taichi! Why are you late? Did something happen?" asked Inaba the moment she laid eyes on him.

"I mean, *yeah*, something happened, alright... but at the same time, it was nothing... I think I probably got Liber—Mmmph?!" He blinked as she clapped her right hand over his mouth. Annoyed, he pushed her off. "That hurt! Watch your nails!" His lips still stung from the impact.

"That's what you get for blabbing about *you-know-what* in the classroom! Keep your voice down next time!"

She had an extremely good point.

"S-Sorry."

Even during lunch, the room was still about half-full, and as long as they kept their voices down, the chatter would prevent anyone from eavesdropping on certain sensitive topics.

"Still, I'd appreciate it if you'd be a little less violent when you warn me about this stuff..."

"*Or* you could learn to use your brain and I won't have to warn you in the first place! I only use violence where it's warranted!"

You sure about that? Taichi thought.

"So, what happened? Wait... Taichi, your cheek's looking kinda red. What's that about?"

"Oh god, *still*?! I was hoping it would've gone away by now..." Taichi gingerly poked at his cheek.

"Just a little. It's not super noticeable or anything. So? Let's hear it."

“Well... To be honest, I didn’t realize Liberation worked like this, but... I think it must have struck early this morning.”

“Yeah?” She narrowed her eyes intently.

“I think it was what they call... sloth.”

Inaba froze for a moment, then flicked his forehead.

“Ow! Okay, *that* violence was most certainly NOT warranted!”

“Sloth?! So you just slept in! Damn it, Taichi! You had me worried, thinking it was something serious! Don’t freak me out like that, you jackass!”

“W-Well... Maybe it’s not serious to you, but it was for *me*, okay?!”

That morning, Taichi slept through his alarm. It continued to buzz and buzz to no avail, until finally Taichi’s mother realized he was going to be late for school and promptly sent his sister Rina to wake him.

But no matter how much she shook or prodded him, he didn’t stir.

Fear took hold of Rina, and she began to get more and more aggressive in her attempts to wake him, eventually resorting to slapping him back and forth, and when *that* didn’t work, she broke down in tears right there on his bedroom floor.

When Taichi’s mother heard Rina sobbing, she rushed to the scene, checked Taichi’s pulse, and declared “Eh, he’s fine. Probably just sleep-deprived.” And with that, she sent Rina off to school and left for work.

When Taichi finally awoke a little before noon, he found a note on the kitchen table and an email from Rina detailing what had happened. (His mother’s note wasn’t particularly helpful.)

“I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? You’re both bizarrely easygoing and dense as a goddamn brick!”

Taichi didn’t appreciate being compared to the sort of mother who would shrug her shoulders and say “eh” about her own son.

“Anyway... It definitely sounds like you were Liberated, alright. Did you notice any physical changes or anything?”

“Nope. Nothing. If I had to say... My mind feels a lot clearer, maybe?”

“No shit. That’s because you got enough sleep for once, genius.”

He was getting awfully tired of Inaba’s sass. That probably wasn’t a good thing.

“So, did you hear a voice in your head?” she asked.

“Uhh... If I did, I sure don’t remember it... Maybe I was unconscious at the time.”

“Hmmm... Well, you seem fine, at least. I guess you must’ve gotten Liberated while you were asleep, and that in turn forcibly unleashed your desire to *sleep in*. It’s not like you woke up and went back to sleep, right?”

“Right. I think.”

“Alright then. Guess that proves Heart-shit was telling the truth when it said it could Liberate our subconscious desires. Turns out we don’t even have to be awake for this crap.” She folded her arms in contemplation. “That said, it sounds like this one lasted for a lot longer than any of the others thus far... Were you really Liberated the whole time? Or did it wear off after your family left the house and you were just asleep...? Either way, that’s still a considerable amount of time to be under its influence... I’m starting to think it was a good thing you were asleep.”

“Yeah, me too. By the way, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask.”

“Hmm?”

“Why is Nagase collapsed over her desk like she’s dead? She didn’t get Liberated into a nap or something, did she?”

The two of them had been standing around chatting in her general vicinity for quite some time now, and yet Nagase Iori hadn’t attempted to join the conversation. She hadn’t even moved a muscle.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. I told her not to let it get to her, but... I think she just needs time to recover from the emotional impact.”

“Uhhh... What happened...?”

He remembered Watase had alluded to a “big moment” earlier that day.

Inaba walked over and placed a hand on Nagase’s shoulder. “Taichi wants to know what happened.”

“Uggghhh...” Groaning, Nagase slowly raised her head. Her complexion was haggard, her eyes were red—even her ponytail was droopier than usual.

“C’mon, what’s wrong?” Taichi prodded. Whatever it was, it seemed serious.

“Um, Taichi...?”

“Yeah?”

“Whenever there’s a serious moment, or you’re in a quiet room,.. like a movie theatre, or the middle of a test... do you ever get the urge to ruin the moment?”

“Uhhh... Not really... I can relate, though. Seems like the kind of thing you’d do...”

Oh no.

Taichi’s face froze.

“We were in the middle of a quiz, and the whole class was all quiet... and suddenly I felt this urge to scream... and then... the next thing I knew... I yelled ‘YAHOO!’ at the top of my lungs...!”

Truly a tragedy.

“Not only that, but she said it in an Italian accent and jumped up with her fist in the air like she was Mario.”

“Inaban! Don’t rub salt in my wound!”

From the sound of it, it must have been rather surreal to witness.

“But in the end, she managed to convince everyone she was just sleep talking. No harm done,” Inaba continued.

“And...? How did it, uh, go over?” Taichi asked her timidly.

“At first they were startled, naturally, but then the whole room burst out

laughing, and people were just kinda like, ‘That’s lori for you!’ The end.”

“*That’s the worst part!* I scream ‘YAHOO!’ in the middle of class and they handwave it by saying *that’s just who I am?! What does that say about me?!*” Nagase sniffled and wiped her tears with a handkerchief.

“That you’re the kind of person who secretly wants to scream ‘YAHOO!’ during a test?”

“Taichi! You could at least *try* to act surprised! You know I never would’ve done it if that stupid Liberation hadn’t forced me to!”

“You people, I swear... Your desires are so *pedestrian*...” Inaba muttered to herself.

And so lunch period for Class 1-C ended relatively without incident.



Once school let out for the day, Taichi felt himself unclench. He had survived.

Obviously he couldn’t let his guard down just yet, but at least in the clubroom they would be out of the public eye and surrounded by trusted friends. It was their safe space.

When he arrived, he found that they were once again missing their fifth member. Kiriya Yui still had yet to return to school. Someone floated the idea of checking on her, and after debating it for a bit, they decided to give her a call. When she answered, however, she seemed less than enthusiastic about the prospect of a visit. Instead, she told them she’d be back at school once the drama from the station incident had died down.

“It bothers me that we haven’t seen her since «Heartseed» showed up... At least she’s responding to our calls and emails, though. Maybe she just needs some space...” Inaba muttered, her gaze lowered.

“Damn it... I hope she’s okay... Rrgh, this is all «Heartseed»’s fault! She was bawling her eyes out after what happened that day at the station... I swear, if he makes her cry again, I’ll—”

“Pop quiz, Aoki! Name five things you like about Yui!” Inaba shouted suddenly.

“Cute! Energetic! Strong as heck! Really cute! Pretty hair! Super short! Total sweetheart! A little childish, but in a good way...”

“She said *five*. That was like eight,” Taichi retorted.

“Five just isn’t enough!”

“You said ‘cute’ twice!”

“Well, Aoki? Feeling less angry?”

“Whawha? Angry? Was I? Oh... Right... I got kinda pissy thinkin’ about «Heartseed»... So?”

“Don’t you remember what we talked about yesterday? I told you, try to let go of any strong emotions! This Liberation shit is mostly harmless as long as we don’t let our minds wander anywhere problematic.”

“Oh yeah... Sorry... I just got carried away...” Aoki slumped his shoulders in regret.

“Relatable. Just try to keep your desires tame—like screaming ‘YAHOO!’ in the middle of class—and that’ll be the worst of it.”

“Uh, Taichi?! Is this some new kind of bullying I don’t know about?! Are you bullying me right now?!” Nagase wailed, tugging on his uniform.

At that point, Aoki looked up. “Wait, but... we agreed that it’s better to just be ourselves, right? Ngh... I’m so lost, dude...!”

“Well, ideally we’d want to lessen our desires as much as possible, but obviously there’s a limit to how much we can successfully control our own emotions,” Inaba replied. “So, for the sake of avoiding any large-scale incidents, it’s best that we just be ourselves without bottling anything up. That means if we feel any intense emotions start to build, we need to distract ourselves with other thoughts to keep ourselves calm.”

“Hmmm... So basically, whenever I feel myself getting all capital-g Grump, I gotta think about Yui until I’m Not-So-Grump?”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever works for you,” Inaba answered with a shrug.

“Okie-doke, I’ll try that. One Yui, two Yuis, three Yuis...”

“What is she, a sheep?” Taichi snarked.

“Four Yuis... Wait, what the? Now I’m really missing her all of a sudden! Uh oh... I feel the urge to dash right over to her house! Did I get Liberated?!”

Inaba smacked Aoki over the head. “I’m getting pretty tired of your stupid shenanigans, but I’m gonna say this anyway: learn some goddamn moderation! And no, I’d wager you aren’t Liberated, dipshit!”

“Take it easy, Inaban! Remember all that stuff you told us? That goes for you too!” Nagase cut in. “I am worried about Yui, though. I think maybe punching the crap out of those dudes really did a number on her... in more ways than one.”

Even though her raw fighting ability outstripped the average man, it didn’t stop Kiriya from being afraid of them.

Taichi thought back to the tearful look in her eyes that fateful day when her secret phobia came to light.

She was so small, and yet her suffering was so great. Taichi wanted to protect her. He *needed* to.

[Save her.]

Just then, he heard a voice in his head. *His* voice.

The next instant, his consciousness seemed to float out of his body, though he was very much still awake.

Then the fever kicked in, and Taichi jumped out of his chair.

Everyone turned to look at him in surprise. He wanted to tell them he was Liberated—but his lips wouldn’t move.

He felt the urge to bolt out of the room. But he didn’t *want* to.

A battle raged on inside his mind.

“I’ll be back,” he declared against his will, then turned and headed for the door.

“Wait... Are you Liberated right now?” Inaba asked, but her voice sounded so distant. No one else seemed to matter anymore. His mind was filled with only

one thing: his new mission.

He wanted to stop himself, and yet he couldn't.

But before he could take off—

“H-Hold it, Taichi!” Nagase seized his left arm.

“Not so fast, bro!” Aoki seized his right arm. He flailed his limbs, trying to break free. “Pull it together, pal! We just went over this! You gotta start counting Yuis! Wait... Maybe that only works for me...”



He could hear Nagase shouting, too. “Taichi! What’s the matter with you?! What are you trying to do here?!”

Then he felt the words rise up his throat and leave his lips.

“I need to help her... Kiriyaama is suffering, and I need to help her!”

BAM.

Out of nowhere, Inaba’s fist slammed into his cheek.

“Your ‘helper-itis’ is starting to piss me off. Get a life already.”

Taichi didn’t blame her for getting mad. After all, they had just agreed it was best not to visit her right now. But he couldn’t bear the thought of Kiriyaama alone and in pain. He wanted to rush over there and do something—*anything*.

He wrenched himself from their grasp, but they seized him again.

Nagase grabbed his hand. “*Caaalm dooown!*”

“To be fair, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with feeling the desire to help Yui, but... I guess it’s probably better that we stop him... Alright, Iori, start hugging him!”

“You got it, Inaba! Wait... Why me?! Aoki’s way stronger!”

“Hear me out, alright? I’ve got an idea. If we can shift Taichi’s strongest desire to something else, maybe it’ll shift the effects of his Liberation. Or maybe it’ll cancel it out altogether!”

As Inaba and Nagase continued to squabble, Taichi tried to get around them, but Inaba shoved him back. He flailed against his three captors.

“Granted, it might not work, but it’s at least worth a shot, don’t you think? Just do it! Start low and work your way up! Court his inner pervert!”

No, no, no, no, no! I can’t! ...I mean, not that I’m against it or anything!”

“Iori-chan, you gotta do this! Do it for Taichi!” Aoki piped up.

“Are you guys even taking this seriously?! Because it kinda feels like you’re screwing around!” Taichi yelled as he shoved them all away.

“So what if we are?” Inaba replied calmly. He hadn’t been expecting her to

ask so... innocently. How was he supposed to react to that? “We know you could never hurt a fly, you self-sacrificing goddamn martyr.”

Meanwhile, Nagase pointed at him. “Wait... You’re not even Liberated anymore, are you?”



“Seems like the majority of Liberations last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes,” Inaba mused to herself after everyone had calmed down.

“What about the one I had this morning? You know, when I overslept?”

“...I’d like to believe it was an outlier,” she replied, wincing.

“Seems like they’re pretty short... y’know, comparatively speaking. Seems like a lot of the time the Liberation ends before we even have a chance to act on our impulses,” Nagase commented.

“That does seem to be the case a lot of the time,” Inaba agreed.

“In that case, maybe we should try to stay focused on desires that are too complicated to act on straight away.”

“I dunno... I think a lot of these spur-of-the-moment impulses are like, a reaction to the stuff that goes on around us or whatever. We can’t not think about that stuff,” Aoki argued.

Nagase clapped her hands to her mouth in shock. “Oh my god... *Aoki just made a good point...!*”

“I have my moments, okay?!”

“I wonder if that bastard is having fun watching us freak out over the problems we create... Is it really that fascinating to observe all the little shifts in our relationships and feelings...? So why bother explaining things to us at all? To make himself seem important? No... Did he do it purely to get a rise out of us? In that case...” While Nagase and Aoki were bickering away, Inaba continued to think aloud.

This was the Inaba Himeko they all knew and loved. Evidently she’d meant it when she said she intended to fight «Heartseed» to the bitter end.

She sat perfectly straight, biting her thumbnail, clearly deep in thought. As Taichi gazed at her, she suddenly looked up, and their eyes met.

“What are you ogling me for?”

“I’m not ogling you! Wait... Oh god, I’m not genetically disposed to having resting ogler face at all times, am I...?”

That would suck. He’d never be able to so much as look in the general direction of a girl ever again.

Inaba stared at him for a moment, her eyes narrowed.

“Wh-What?”

“Nothing... I was just thinking you might be the most at-risk this time around.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on. You’re always trying to throw yourself under the bus to save someone else, and that’s on a good day.”

He thought back to the statement he’d made when Nagase was in the ICU.

—If one of us has to sacrifice themselves, let it be me.

“I worry about what might happen if «Heartseed» Liberates all those weird desires you’ve got in there, you know? Frankly, I’m terrified. What if you actually die this time?”

She had a point. Still, he wanted to believe he’d changed since then. After all, he’d learned his lesson. He was free to ignore everyone else and act only on his own emotions—but doing so would hurt them deeply. He knew that now, and he was making a conscious effort to improve.

But what did his *heart* want?

He had no way of knowing.

...Or would the Liberation help him find out?

Chapter 4: Falling Apart

Maybe I was lucky, or maybe my “true self” just wasn’t all that dangerous... or perhaps it was proof that our countermeasures are actually effective.

Either way, the weekend passed by entirely without incident.

Notable “events” included stealing from my brother’s plate at dinner, splurging on new computer equipment I was trying to hold off on even though I could technically afford it, posing in my underwear in front of the biggest mirror in the house while I was home alone, and sneaking into my brother’s room to look for porno mags out of curiosity towards the opposite sex. (Thankfully I was able to stop myself in time, so I didn’t find anything.) Yes, they were all trifling matters at best... at least, in my opinion. And according to the emails I received from the others, they all had similarly uneventful weekends as well.

For example, one had gotten so overcome with worry that his little sister had a secret boyfriend that he proceeded to snoop through her cell phone, and as a result, said sister gave him the cold shoulder for the rest of the following day until he bought her a bunch of candy from the convenience store.

Another of them had been on her way home from a shopping trip when she was suddenly hit with the urge to climb a tree, and once she got to the top, she remembered she was wearing a skirt and thus was giving everyone in the vicinity a good look at her panties.

Yet another of them had found himself wishing the very concept of homework would disappear from this earth, and as a result put all of his textbooks and notebooks in the recycling bin, then later had to hastily dig them all back out again.

Simple, stupid stuff that hardly warranted more than a laugh and a “Nice going, dumbass.”

On Monday morning, I left the house.

Same as always. Same as always. Same as always.

Just another day of taking the lead and setting an example for the others, same as always.

So long as they all exercise a little caution, surely the others are better off being themselves, too. After all, they're good people, and as long as you're pure of heart, you have nothing to fear from this phenomenon. So we're all fine, myself included.

...Or am I?

I don't consider myself a misanthrope, but I do have some trust issues.

The way I see it, the world is rife with enemies.

Why? Because I believe that all humans are evil by nature.

And why do I believe that? Because I'm one of them.

And yet you consider your friends to be "good people"...

Fuck off. I don't have all the answers.

So what kind of person am I?



After second period, Nagase Iori returned to the classroom with a message for Yaegashi Taichi.

"I just got back from Class 1-A. Apparently Yui didn't show up today. Again."

"I see..."

This was now Kiriya Yui's fourth absence in a row, not counting the weekend, and Taichi was beside himself with worry.

"She said she was fine over the phone, but..." Before Nagase could finish her sentence, Inaba Himeko walked up to them.

"I hope it didn't break her..."

"Hope *what* didn't break her?" Taichi asked.

"The Liberation. Like I said last time, this sort of thing could destroy someone."

Break. Destroy.

He knew it was no exaggeration.

“That’s it. We’re going to Yui’s house today,” Nagase declared, fear in her eyes. “I know her address.”

Taichi nodded firmly. “Sounds good.”

“Will you two please relax? It’s way too early to start freaking out. Smile, for god’s sake! If we go over there like it’s a funeral procession, it’ll only make her feel worse. Let’s just be excited to see our friend, alright?” Inaba grinned.

And yet, for the briefest of moments, in some way he couldn’t quite describe, that grin looked to be the most fragile of all.



The Kiriya residence was located in a townhouse complex.

Taichi rang the intercom once, then a second time. Finally, they got a response.

“Hello...?”

Her voice was weak and lethargic—but it was unmistakably Kiriya. Taichi was a little relieved that her parents hadn’t answered instead.

“Kiriya-saaaan! Come out and plaaay!” Nagase called out with a childish affectation. She seemed to be in high spirits, though it wasn’t clear how much of it was sincere and how much was an act.

“Huh? Wait... I-Iori? No way... What are you doing here?” Kiriya sounded pretty startled, which itself was fairly unsurprising considering they hadn’t asked in advance.

“I’m here too! And Inaba-chan, and Taichi!” Aoki Yoshifumi leaned in front of Nagase and waved.

“There’s no camera, genius.” Maybe Aoki was doing it on purpose, but Taichi decided to point it out anyway.

“Wh... huh...? Y-You’re all here...?”

Nagase pushed Aoki out of the way and leaned in close to the intercom. “Yup! We’re here to check on you! Mind if we come in? Or would your family not be

cool with that?”

“I mean, they’re not here right now... but... you can’t come in. Please, just... go home.”

Her voice was shaking, but it was clear she meant it.

“No boys allowed, I take it? What about just me and Inaban?”

“That’s not it... I just... I can’t let you inside.”

“But why n—”

“Hello there, everyone!” Out of nowhere, a woman, ostensibly Kiriyaama’s mother, arrived. “Friends of Yui’s, perhaps? I see you’re all wearing the same school uniform. Did you need something?”

As it turned out, things were even worse than they had imagined. According to Kiriyaama’s mom, she had been holed up in her bedroom for days now.

“Come on, Yui! Open the door! Your friends are here to see you!” Mrs. Kiriyaama shouted as she knocked loudly on her daughter’s bedroom door.

“Shut up! Just tell them to go home!” Kiriyaama shouted back.

Mrs. Kiriyaama turned to face them, her gaze downcast and guilty. “Sorry about this... She just refuses to come out these days...” She was already a fairly petite woman, but now she seemed even smaller. “She’s never acted this way before... Perhaps the incident with the police was simply too much for her...”

“Don’t worry, ma’am. She’s just a little shaken up right now. I’m sure she’ll be back to normal in no time,” Inaba replied with her most cordial smile. Apparently she could actually be nice if she felt like it.

“She’s right, Mom! Just leave it to us!” Aoki declared.

“Aoki, did you just—never mind.” Taichi was going to comment on that, but thought better of it. It just wasn’t worth the effort.

“Thank you for looking out for my daughter,” Mrs. Kiriyaama replied with a bow. “Now then, I don’t want to intrude, so I’ll be downstairs. Let me know if you need anything.” With that, she trudged down the stairs. Her complexion

had looked rather pale, too.

It was then that Taichi realized the gravity of the situation they found themselves in. The five of them may have been the only ones cursed with Liberation, but that didn't mean they were the only ones affected by it. Not by a long shot.

"Yui... It's really not cool to talk to your mom like that," said Nagase. She sounded unusually... angry. Maybe she was particularly sensitive to mother-daughter relationships, considering all the divorces and everything her own mom had gone through.

"C'mon, Yui. Let's talk about it. This is some serious stuff."

But even Aoki couldn't convince her to open the door.

"I told you... just go home... I know you guys are worried... I get that... I just need a little more time before I can go back to school..."

Inaba sighed and cracked her neck. "Guess we'll have to do this the hard way."

"Do what?" Taichi asked timidly.

"Nothing drastic. I'm just gonna say the magic words to get that door open."

"Oh god... Do I want to know...?"

"Ahem! Listen up, everyone! Starting now, I will reveal all of Kiriyama Yui's secrets one by one until she opens the door. First, her measurements—"

Click. The doorknob turned.

"Wait, wait, wait, WAAAAAIT! I'll let you in, okay?! God!"

"Tch... Didn't even let me get to any of the fun ones..."

Yikes. Sounds like you made the right call, Taichi thought.

Kiriyama sat on her bed in a tiny ball, knees tucked up to her chest. She was wearing a sweater and track pants, but it was obvious she hadn't actually been outside. Her hair, normally shiny and well-kept, was now a tangled mess, and fatigue was visibly etched into her face.

Taichi and the others each plopped themselves down on her bedroom floor. It was a bit of a tight fit for four guests.

“Sorry for barging in like this, Yui. We’ve just been really worried about you, you know?”

“It’s okay, Iori,” Kiriyaama replied, hugging a large flower-print pillow. “Anybody would feel that way if one of their friends just like, randomly stopped coming to school.”

“Are ya feelin’ sick at all? We can leave if ya need us to... Whoa, you’ve got a big, fat pimple on your forehead! Is that—?”

“Aagh! STOP! Don’t look at it! God!” Kiriyaama hastily flattened her bangs over her forehead to hide it. “Ugh... This is the worst day of my life...”

“Have you been binge eating?” Inaba asked.

“Wha?!” Kiriyaama flopped down onto the bed. Evidently that was a yes. “N-No! It’s just... For some reason yesterday I had this crazy urge to eat a bunch of sugary stuff... I mean, okay, I guess I get that craving like, a lot... But yesterday it just wouldn’t stop! Then later on I checked the calories, and... God, I literally wanna diiiiie...”

Evidently she must have gotten Liberated right around the time she was hungry for sweets.

“Please tell me you’re not skipping school just because of one measly pimple,” Inaba sneered.

At this, Kiriyaama shot upright. “No way! Even I’m not *that* shallow!”

“Then are you afraid of «Heartseed»’s Liberation?”

The question hit her like a ton of bricks. The color drained from her face, and she began to tremble. Her answer was now so obvious, the whole room fell awkwardly silent.

But staying silent wasn’t going to help anyone.

“Yui... It’s okay to be scared,” Aoki soothed. “Anybody would be freaked out if their body started actin’ on impulse.”

“What is it about the Liberation that scares you, specifically?” Taichi asked.

At his question, Kiriyaama’s eyes welled up with tears, and her lip began to quiver.

Nagase shot him an icy glare. “Taichi! Would it kill you to be a little more gentle with her?”

“Urk... Sorry...”

“He went about it the right way, if you ask me. Better than tiptoeing around her like she’s made of glass.”

“What *you* think isn’t important right now, Inaban. This is about Yui!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever...” Inaba dismissed Nagase’s anger with a wave of her hand. “So, Yui. What is it about the Liberation that makes you want to isolate yourself? We’ve been over how it works, yes? I mean, don’t get me wrong. I wouldn’t blame you if you were afraid of not knowing when your body might start acting on its own... So, is that it?”

Kiriyaama nodded, her gaze averted.

“Seriously?” Inaba continued. “Give me a fucking break. You’re not the only one who has to suffer through this shit.”

“Well, I can’t help it! I... I don’t want to hurt anyone else...!” Fat tears rolled down Kiriyaama’s cheeks. More than anything, she was afraid of what she might do to the others. That much was painfully clear. “Th... The day of the incident... I saw those guys harassing that girl... and I thought to myself, ‘God, those scumbags. Someone ought to help her’... and then... I heard a **[voice]** in my head... and the next thing I knew, I lost all control...”

“Yeah, but,” Nagase cut in, “«Heartseed» was the one who made you—”

“BUT IT WAS MY FAULT FOR WANTING TO BEAT THEM UP IN THE FIRST PLACE!” Kiriyaama screamed.

Taichi didn’t blame her for feeling scared or guilty. After all, those emotions—those desires—couldn’t be pawned off on anyone else. They were one hundred percent her own. And there was no denying that fact.

“Unlike you guys, I have a lot of negative impulses when it comes to men, so...

honestly, anything could happen. There's no telling what I might do... That's why I can't leave my house."

She had every right to feel that way, or so Taichi thought.

But the next instant—

"Quit trying to play the victim card," Inaba spat, her expression twisted in contempt, her eyes narrowed in a glare so sharp it threatened to draw blood. "You think you get a free pass to hide in your room? You're not special."

Inaba was livid.

But was it really her saying these things, or was she Liberated?

"W-Well... but... This way I can't hurt anyone... right?"

Inaba leaned in close to Kiriama as she trembled in fear. "Do you actually comprehend the situation we find ourselves in? Do you? Because I get the feeling you don't."

"Inaban!"

"I-Inabacchan!"

"Calm down, Inaba!"

But Inaba didn't stop.

"We are in the palm of that fucker's hand right now. Supposedly it wants us to entertain it, hence it's making us do all this body-swap and Liberation shit. Are you with me so far?"

Her anger had cowed them all into silence. No one dared say a word. Even Taichi wasn't sure what to do; after all, Inaba wasn't trying to attack her. She was just... talking.

"Granted, you're right about one thing: of all the options available to us in the face of this Liberation phenomenon, I admit, hiding is the safest. But sometimes, the best option is also the worst."

He recalled the question she had once asked «Heartseed»: *Is there a rule against isolating ourselves?*

"As long as you're in a safe place with no one else around, nothing will

happen. Thus, it's our best defense against the phenomenon, as well as an offensive tactic against «Heartseed»." Inaba stood up and put one foot on Kiriyaama's bed. "But let me ask you this: Is that entertaining for it?" They could only guess, since they had no way of knowing for sure, but the answer was probably no. "I'll ask you again: Is this entertaining for «Heartseed»? And if not, what do you think it's going to do about that? The way I see the situation, there are three possible outcomes. One, it gives up. Two, it waits for things to improve. Or three, it finds a way to spice things up."

Inaba had clearly spent a lot of time analyzing their circumstances. Taichi was sincerely impressed... and a bit intimidated.

"Believe it or not, I actually asked that thing if isolating ourselves was a valid option. And you know what it said? 'It sounds interesting. Alternatively, if need be, I can make it interesting.' "

Kiriyaama stopped crying and froze in place. The color drained from her complexion.

"In other words, it won't be taking option number one. It'll be either two or three. That said, its word doesn't mean shit, so we'll have to take everything it says with a grain of salt... but there's still a chance it meant just what it said. Really, the most critical thing to be aware of here is that it has the power to intervene." Inaba's soliloquy had reached its climax. "So, are you just gonna keep hiding so it drags this Liberation shit out as long as possible? Or are you actually *trying* to give it a reason to make things worse for us? Are you even aware of the burden you're putting on everyone else while you have your little pity party in here? Well?!"

Kiriyaama's expression crumpled. "I just... I don't know... I don't know what to do...!"

"We're not here to coddle you. Stop crying and grow the fuck up!"

That was the last straw.

"Inaban! Enough!" Nagase shouted. But it was too late.

Kiriyaama dove under her blankets and began to sob convulsively, her voice audibly muffled, like she was trying to hold herself back. It was agony to watch.

Finished with her little speech, Inaba just stood there in silence. Then Nagase climbed onto the bed and began to stroke Kiriyaama's back—gingerly, like a broken toy.

In response, Inaba put her foot back down on the floor and backed off. Her expression was now ghostly pale, without a trace of the aggression from moments earlier, and she was biting her lip so hard Taichi worried she might draw blood.

Inaba was known for her blunt and often caustic personality, but even she would ordinarily never be that harsh with Yui. Surely her outburst had indeed been a result of Liberation.

She looked utterly destroyed, and Taichi just didn't know what to say to her after that... Then she collapsed onto the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry, Yui. I didn't mean to blow up at you like that... Hell, I didn't mean to get that angry in the first place... I just got Liberated, that's all... I know you're suffering... I know you must feel so much guilt over hurting those people... What I said was cruel, and I'm sorry. Please forgive me." Desperate to patch things up, she reached out to touch Kiriyaama.

"But... that's... how you really feel... isn't it?" Kiriyaama choked between sobs.

Inaba's hand wavered, then fell limply back at her side.

A chill ran down Taichi's spine. This was the true danger of the Liberation, and now it threatened to break them apart.

In the end, they never did convince Kiriyaama to leave her house that day.



Kiriyaama didn't show up to school the following morning, either.

Naturally, everyone in their grade was gossiping about the vigilante heroine-turned-absentee student. And because Taichi was a fellow associate in her club, people asked him about her. A lot.

Consumed with worry, he found himself thinking about her during class—and stopped himself. What if he got Liberated right then? Would he try to get up and leave in the middle of the lecture? After all, he had one such incident under

his belt already.

Ever since Nagase's "Mario moment," the CRC had managed to avoid causing any spectacles at school. Of course, it helped that by default, each person only got Liberated anywhere from zero to three times per day, but the biggest contributor was the preventative measure Inaba had come up with: *Either focus 100% on class, or sleep.*

Nagase and Inaba were both skilled in choosing when to focus and when to sleep. As for Aoki, who struggled to pay attention even on a good day, he had a power move: stay up all night long, then conk out during class.

As for Taichi, paying attention in class came naturally to him. Were he Liberated, the worst that ever happened was that he would start asking the teacher a few too many questions.

Can't think about Kiriya right now... Just focus on the lesson and worry about it later...

And so time ticked by, second by second.

That day, during break...

The next class was to be held in a different classroom, so Classroom 1-C was nearly empty.

"Let's get a move on, Yaegashi! We're gonna be late!" Watase Shingo called, and Taichi got to his feet.

Just then, an angry shout rang out in the classroom.

"How should I know?! Stop asking me!"

It was Nagase.

"Sheesh. I was just wondering what's up with that Kiriya girl, that's all," replied the subject of Nagase's ire, pouting her lips.

"You think *you* want to know?! Try being me!" Nagase shouted back. Then she froze, and her eyes widened.

"God, what's got your panties in a bunch?" the other girl snapped back.

“Oh... No, I... I didn’t mean... uh... I didn’t mean to yell at you...” Nagase mumbled sheepishly. It must have been Liberation at work.

Taichi started to head over there—and stopped himself again. What if he got Liberated right as he came to Nagase’s rescue? Hadn’t he already tried to physically hurt Fujishima Maiko for little more than a joke at Nagase’s expense?

Then again, the chances of Liberation striking at precisely that moment were relatively low— No, wait. Even if «Heartseed» claimed the phenomenon would strike purely at random, it could still control the change manually, too. And if it happened to be paying close attention right now, would it let this opportunity slip by?

“You really think you’re all that, don’t you? You’re so *full of yourself*.” The other girl’s face was flushed with rage.

“No... That’s not true...”

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you gonna go save your princess?” Watase asked. He’d phrased it like a joke, but the look in his eyes was dead serious.

“Well...”

He could see Inaba Himeko standing right nearby. Surely he could entrust the matter to her.

Or so he thought.

And yet Inaba barely glanced at Nagase before leaving the classroom.

This upset Taichi even more than Nagase’s outburst. How could she abandon Nagase in what was clearly a moment of crisis? There must have been some mistake. Maybe she was wrestling with her own Liberation or something...

“Hey!”

Watase’s voice brought him back to reality.

Right. I have to help Nagase!

But before he could take another step, a shadow fell over the two bickering students.

It was Fujishima Maiko, president of Class 1-C.

“Stop right there, both of you.” She moved between them and, with a hand on each of their shoulders, gently pushed them both apart. Then she stood next to Nagase and turned to face the other girl. “Sorry about this, Setouchi-san. Nagase-san here is just a bit sensitive when it comes to Kiriya-san. Not to mention, she’s been asked the same question over and over all day today, so I imagine she was already a bit on edge. Isn’t that right, Nagase-san?” Adjusting her glasses, she turned to look at Nagase.

“Huh? Oh, uh... Yeah... Lately I’ve been really freaked out about it, actually... so I’m just kind of emotional right now... But still, you were just trying to ask me a question. You didn’t deserve me biting your head off over it. I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.” Nagase bowed her head in a sincere apology.

“Whoa... No need to apologize. I mean, it’s not that serious... Look, I’m sorry too. I got kinda pissed just now, and I said something pretty uncool. Kinda pathetic of me, actually.”

“No, it’s fine. After the way I acted, I don’t blame you for getting mad... Oh crap, class is gonna start! We should head over there!” Nagase turned to look at Fujishima. “Thanks, Fujishima-san.”

And so it all turned out just fine without Taichi’s help.

“Damn, Fujishima-san is so badass!”

Watase’s remark went in one ear and out the other.



School ended for the day.

Every time Taichi started to think about Kiriya, or Nagase, or Inaba, he was forced to stop himself partway through. He was afraid of getting emotional... afraid of those emotions getting Liberated.

But once school was over, there was nothing to fear. They could meet up in the clubroom where it was safe, and if anything happened, the others would be there to stop him and vice versa.

The frustratingly pathetic truth of the matter was, he knew he wouldn’t be able to figure this out on his own. But with a little help from everyone else,

surely it would work out somehow.

Unfortunately, those hopes were summarily dashed.

“I’m going straight home today,” Inaba blurted as Taichi was packing his bookbag. “Already cleared it with Iori. Bye.” With that, she promptly sped out of the classroom, her posture perfectly straight.

“What...? Hey, wait!”

He couldn’t just let her leave. After all, they had yet to resolve the Kiriyaama problem, and they needed to talk about it.

Jumping to his feet, Taichi hurried after her. By the time he made it to the hallway, she was already nearly at her shoe locker. He had to run down the hall to catch her.

“Hold on a sec, Inaba! What do you mean, you’re going straight home? Do you have an errand to run or something?”

“Not really.” Inaba changed out of her indoor shoes, then closed her locker with a metallic *bang*.

“You don’t? Okay, but... but Kiriyaama still isn’t back at school!”

“So what?” Inaba turned and headed outside through the main entrance.

Taichi followed after her. “What do you mean, ‘so what’? We gotta talk about going to see her, obviously!”

“I can’t go. I’ll just make things worse.”

Give me a break, Taichi thought bitterly. *Isn’t it kind of heartless to leave a friend to suffer all alone?*

He felt anger surge up inside his chest... but then he realized.

Maybe Inaba was still feeling guilty about what happened the day before. Maybe she was suffering the same as Kiriyaama—the pain of hurting someone else.

But then he heard a voice in his head.

[Is that any excuse?]

And it was too late.

The now-familiar sensation descended over him. His skin flushed, and his consciousness floated out of his body, still perfectly lucid.

Oh god, please no.

He tried to tell her he was Liberated, but he couldn't. His mouth was moving of its own accord.

"Make things worse? So you're just going to give up, is that it? Well, you can't. We still have to do something."

At last, Inaba stopped short. "You know what your problem is? You assume everyone is like you. You think we're all strong enough to put other people first. Well, I'm not. I'm having a hard enough time as it is just dealing with my own shit!"

"That doesn't give you the right to abandon people when they're hurting!"

"Maybe you expect me to be some *perfect fucking saint*, but I'm just *not*, okay?!"

He desperately tried to stop himself, but to no avail. His impulses had overridden everything. Was it proof of how strongly he felt about it? Was this ultimately just the sort of person he was?

Still the Liberation refused to end.

"I'm disappointed in you, Inaba. I can't believe you would turn your back on your friends." *Stop! Don't say that! That's messed up!* "I thought you were better than that."

The cruelty of it all turned his stomach.

Inaba stared at him in wide-eyed shock for a moment. Then her expression crumpled.

Never before had he seen her so openly hurt... so blatantly on the verge of tears.

Then he realized the fever had left his body. He was in control again. But there was a tightness in his chest that kept him rooted in place, unable to move

an inch. He couldn't begin to imagine how much he must have hurt her just now.

"Well then... Sorry I don't meet your *standards*," she shot back in a watery voice before storming away, cutting across the athletic field and out through the front gates.

Taichi didn't go after her. He couldn't.

With Inaba gone, the mood in the clubroom was heavy and oppressive. After a brief discussion, Taichi, Nagase, and Aoki went to Kiriya's house.

Unfortunately, it didn't fix anything.



The next day, after spending all of the day before wallowing in self-loathing, Taichi left his house early so he could apologize to Inaba first thing that morning.

She was an important part of his life; he had a deep respect for her and trusted her more than anyone else. And it was specifically because he thought so highly of her that he ended up saying the things he did.

But the way he phrased it made it sound like she only had value if she was helpful to others.

At the time, he'd been too busy worrying about Kiriya to pay proper attention to anyone else. Her pain was just as valid as Kiriya's, but he'd failed to see that. And now his stupidity had hurt her even more. He cursed himself for being so pathetic.

The moment he entered the classroom, he walked straight over to Inaba's desk. As usual, she had arrived early.

"Not sure if you got my email last night, but... I'm really sorry for all the stupid crap I said. I was too busy freaking out over the Kiriya thing, and then I got Liberated, and at that point nothing else seemed to matter, and..."

As he spoke, he wondered what good these excuses would do.

Inaba was smiling, but there was something forlorn in her expression. It reminded him of the tearful look in her eyes from the day before, and his heart ached.

“Eh... It’s not your fault.”

“Yeah, it is, actually. I put my own feelings over yours, and—”

“I’m not that hung up on it, to be honest. You said what you said because you care about Yui from the bottom of your heart, right? That’s nothing to beat yourself up over.” She smiled vaguely. “But... I think I’m gonna pass on hanging out in the clubroom or going to Yui’s place. I just need a little time... I’m only human, you know.”

Her tone was gentle—too gentle. Even in the midst of her own suffering, she was still doing her best to reassure him. This only made him feel even more guilty.

She was in pain, and he desperately wanted to help her. But after what happened the previous day, it felt like maybe he was only trying to help people because he personally couldn’t stand to have to see it... in which case, if he got more involved with her, he’d probably just end up hurting her again. The thought terrified him.

For the first time he understood how Inaba felt trying to keep her distance. If staying away from her would help her heal, then maybe it was for the best.

But there was still one thing he needed to make absolutely clear.

“Listen... I want you around, Inaba. You’re one of my best friends, and you matter to me. If at any point you need my help, please, just say the word. Until then... come back soon, okay?”

If nothing else, he could be certain he sincerely meant it.

“Alright. Now get lost, would you? I gotta start focusing on the lesson here in a minute.”

The softness in her voice sounded a lot like sadness.



As with yesterday, the only people who turned up at the clubroom that day

were Taichi, Nagase, and Aoki.

Kiriyama still hadn't come to school. The three of them had gone to see her the day before, but hadn't accomplished much in the process.

"No Inabacchan again today?"

"Nope... I think she still feels bad about all the stuff she said to Yui. She seems tough on the outside, but she's actually pretty sensitive, you know?" Nagase explained quietly. It was clear just how much she cared for Inaba.

"I think... maybe we should just give her a little space for now," Taichi suggested. He hated the implication that they were better off ignoring her, but at the same time, it felt like the right thing to do for Inaba's sake—at least, for the time being, anyway.

"It's kinda empty in here..." Nagase muttered to herself, gazing at the two unoccupied folding chairs where Inaba and Kiriyama should have been sitting.

The absence of his two good friends had left a gaping hole in Taichi's chest. For the briefest of moments, he contemplated whether the whole club might just fall apart at this rate.

"Well, we know Inaba will probably come back after a while, so for now let's focus on Kiriyama," he declared, and with that, the discussion began.

Unfortunately, no amount of brainstorming brought them to a potential solution for the current crisis.

"Going back to that earlier suggestion—"

"Taichi, we already went over that," Nagase interrupted.

They were going in circles. He sighed loudly. There was simply nothing left to debate.

"Man, what do we do...?" Aoki asked, staring up at the ceiling as he lay sprawled out on the couch.

"It's hard to tell what the best option might be... Inaban made a good point, but I don't think Yui's completely in the wrong, either..." Nagase mumbled.

—*Hiding is the safest. But sometimes, the best option is also the worst.*

Was dragging Kiriya outside truly the right move? They just couldn't be sure. And without that conviction, it was hard to take action. To make matters worse, any excessively emotional situation had the potential to go terribly wrong.

They were at a total loss.

His frustration intensified.

...[**Save her.**]...

He thought he heard a faint voice.

He thought he felt his body growing hot.

His mouth moved of its own accord. "I... I just don't think it's healthy for Kiriya to stay cooped up in her room."

"But... but going outside'll just hurt her even more!" Aoki argued.

"Plus, she might hurt other people... Then again, that's no different from any of us, honestly," Nagase pointed out.

He was so sick of hearing the same crap over and over. His mouth moved again. "But she's falling apart in there!"

How could they not see how critical that was?

The last time they saw her, she looked like a mere shadow of her old self. He couldn't bear to see her like that any longer.

"Is doin' *something* 'bout Yui all you care about? I'm tellin' ya, we gotta think ahead!" Aoki snapped.

"Kiriya needs our help *right now*. Everything else can wait!"

As far as he was concerned, she was the priority.

"Gee, I was wondering when you'd show up, *Captain Helper-itis*! Gonna sacrifice yourself to fix everything again?"

"What's your problem? I'm pretty sure you want to help her just as bad as I do!"

Wait... Was his mouth actually moving all by itself?

And yet he couldn't stop.

"Sure, I want to, but I don't know how!"

"Then let's just go see her!"

"And do what?"

"We'll figure it out!"

"You mean like how we 'figured it out' yesterday and the day before that? Oh, wait! *We didn't!*"

"Well, sitting around here sure isn't going to solve anything!"

They needed to take action. Nothing would change unless they took the next step.

"Guys, come on... Knock it off..."

"Fine then. I'll go to her house by myself today." Taichi grabbed his bookbag and got to his feet. Continuing this conversation any longer would only be a waste of time.

"Excuse me!? I don't think so!"

"Today I'm doing things my way. Maybe you can't save her, but I can."

"Who the hell do you think you are, Taichi?! You think you can do anything, is that it?!"

"I've done it before, haven't I? And I sure don't recall *you* ever accomplishing much."

Suddenly, Aoki froze, eyes wide, and his expression shifted.

Taichi could recognize the signs now. Aoki was Liberated.

"Guys, please, just st—"

"Last time you just got lucky! Quit tryin' to hog the spotlight all to yourself!" Aoki jumped out of his chair and marched over to Taichi.

Taichi shoved him backwards. "I'm not hogging the spotlight! I'm helping Kiriya!"

“Helping her? You’re just a ‘goddamn martyr’ who doesn’t wanna have to see her cry!”

“Screw you! At least I’m not a useless clod like you!”

“Wanna say that again, asshole?!”

“*BOTH OF YOU, STOP IT RIGHT NOW!*” Nagase screamed at the top of her lungs. She dove in between the two of them and used both hands to force them apart, eyes ablaze. Was she Liberated, too?

Taichi lost his balance and stumbled back a few steps.

“Taichi, quit being so self-righteous! And Aoki, that’s your jealousy talking!” she yelled, her ponytail swaying violently. “Are either of you even thinking about what’s best for Yui right now?! Or are both of you just tired of having to see her suffer?!”

[Don’t get in my way.]

He heard a voice in his head. This time, it was clear as day.

His body burned so hot, it made molten lava seem like a pleasant bath by comparison.

His senses grew numb.

He was now undeniably Liberated.

Wait, but then what was all that before now? Had he just *assumed* he was Liberated? Imagined a voice in his head? Had he *wanted* to give in to his impulses?

He wasn’t sure what to believe anymore. Was he lashing out because of his own failings?

His body and mind felt more separated than ever before. His consciousness seemed to float away.

Now that he was Liberated, the emotion he felt most strongly would combine with the desire to help Kiriya and override all else. Only one detail mattered: that someone was trying to interfere.

Stop! he wanted to scream. But he couldn’t. Instead—

“Move!” Taichi shouted, and shoved Nagase to the side.

He didn’t push that hard. He was just trying to get her out of the way.

But he was a guy, and he was stronger than she was.

It caught her off-guard.

Nagase lost her balance and slammed face-first into the metal lockers against the wall. She whimpered and fell to her knees, clutching her head.

All at once, the fever faded from his body, and his senses returned in full force. Instantly he ran over to her. “A-Are you okay, Nagase?!”

It was then that Aoki delivered the final blow.

“See what I mean?! Your stupid narcissism hurts everyone else around you!”

His heart felt like it was in a vice.

Aoki was right.

He was arrogant. He would do anything to not have to see people suffering, even if it meant the person he loved most would pay the price.

He wasn’t capable of saving anyone.

Taichi stared blankly for a few moments. Then Aoki froze.

“...No, I take that back! I crossed a line... I’m... sorry...” Aoki’s voice petered out.

Everything after that flew by in a blur. He couldn’t quite remember, but they’d probably decided to go home. He recalled Nagase’s forehead being a bit red... apologizing to her dozens of times... and he remembered her saying, “There’s nothing to apologize for. I got Liberated and forced my way in between you, and you were just trying to get me to move.”

Other than that, it all felt hazy, like a dream.

That night, Taichi curled up under his blanket. He had hurt someone—the one special girl in his life—and that terrified him.

Then it hit him.

Ah... Now I know how Kiriyama feels.



I fucked up.

So I decided to keep my distance.

I didn't want to destroy everything.

But at the same time, they had expectations of me.

Expectations too big for me to fill... but I went along with it anyway.

It felt good to feel needed. I wanted to earn a place among them. So I crafted a false version of myself.

Now the illusion is crumbling. Serves me right.

Maybe I can never go back.

The thought makes my chest ache.

I miss them so much.

Without their reassurance, my mind wanders into so many dark places.

Once again, I find myself too scared to go near them.

I don't want to hurt them... but it breaks my heart to stay away.

Where do I go? Where do I put myself? Where do I belong?

I ought to be worrying about her, like everyone else.

And yet I keep thinking only of myself, over and over and over and over and over and over.

I hate myself so goddamn much.

They all think I'm so much better than I actually am. But the mask will slip eventually.

He was the last person I wanted to see me like that.

Him, of all people. Him. Him. *Him*.

I can't be who they want me to be. Not anymore.

I'm so stupid... I'm trash...



The next day, no one turned up at Rec Hall Room 401.

Chapter 5: Stronger Together

The day after the incident with Aoki Yoshifumi and Nagase Iori in the clubroom, Yaegashi Taichi headed to school, same as always.

Truth be told, maybe an arrogant, self-obsessed asshole like him was better off staying home... but something told him that would only make things worse. After all, his house wasn't exactly free of risks—his whole family was there.

Besides, if he went into isolation, Nagase would almost certainly blame herself, and he didn't want to hurt her again, either physically or otherwise.

But at the same time, if that was how he sincerely felt, then wasn't it kind of selfish of him to go outside in the first place when he couldn't even control his own actions?

He didn't know what the right answer was. He was just stumbling blindly at this point.

And now here he was at school... but that latent fear of losing control continued to fester in the back of his mind.

He decided to keep his distance from everyone, focus on schoolwork, and try to survive the day. He'd already told Nagase his plan by email, so whenever she came around, he purposely avoided her.

As for Aoki, he'd sent him an email apologizing for everything he'd said yesterday... but he had yet to receive a reply. When gym class rolled around, it became obvious that Aoki was intentionally ignoring him.

At the end of the day, Taichi found he lacked the courage to go to the clubroom.

The next day, he continued on just the same as the day before.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone for so long without talking to Nagase or Inaba when they weren't even absent. Normally they said hi to each

other at least once a day during break.

At this point, Watase Shingo and his other friends had started asking “Are you in a bad mood or something?” with increasing frequency. As it turned out, pulling away had the tendency to attract unwanted attention.

Last but most assuredly not least, there was the matter of Kiriya Yui. Over a week had passed since the incident at the station, and she still hadn’t turned up at school—not today, nor the day before.

According to what Taichi had heard—as in, he was straight-up eavesdropping—Nagase had gone to Kiriya’s house alone the day before, to no avail. And supposedly she was planning on going again later that day as well. She wasn’t the only one, either; apparently there were other girls in Kiriya’s class who were starting to make similar attempts, though without knowing the context behind her isolation none of them had any real success.

He needed to figure out what to do about Kiriya, but if he got Liberated in the process, there was no telling what might happen. Thus, he was better off discussing Kiriya in a group with the rest of the CRC—but even that was a gamble. If any of them, particularly himself, started to get emotional, chances were high that someone could get hurt. He was perfectly boxed in on all sides.

Granted, he was still a dick, but at least now he was somewhat self-aware.

And so time continued to pass by fruitlessly. Once again, Taichi couldn’t bring himself to go to the clubroom.

Then the weekend rolled around.

On Saturday, Taichi stayed home, holed up in his room. The time he spent alone in perpetual dread of Liberation seemed to stretch on for an eternity. Even his sister Rina was concerned for his health.

He just wanted to figure it all out—but there was no telling what he might do once he started to think about it in earnest. It was so depressing.

At one point he got Liberated, and the next thing he knew, his alarm clock was in pieces. Somewhere deep down, there was a destructive impulse waiting to strike... The thought paralyzed him.

Whenever he was alone, he couldn't help but overthink everything. And now he was starting to think there was no hope left—that he was just a monster.

On Monday, he tossed his obsessive worries out the window and headed to school.

All day long, he did his best not to think negative thoughts. He kept his mind perfectly blank, focusing only on the here and now.

Truth be told, he didn't think he was doing a great job of controlling his emotions. Every little thing set off a new torrent of anxiety. But at least he managed not to hurt anyone with his Liberation.

Did I just get lucky, or am I not actually all that dangerous?

Either way, another day came and went—another day of not speaking to anyone else in the CRC.



Scene: Monday afternoon, sixth period homeroom, Classroom 1-C.

Class president Fujishima Maiko stood at the lectern, leading a discussion regarding the traditional school event set to take place at the end of the week.

Taichi focused his full attention on the conversation at hand—or at least, he tried to, at any rate.

“Man, I’m sick of this crap. Why should we have to decide? Just figure it out yourself!” Watase Shingo muttered. He now sat just one desk away from Taichi; they had been seated relatively close at the start of the semester, when the seating chart was organized alphabetically by name, but the recent seating change had put them even closer.

“The whole point of this trip is that we get to choose,” Taichi replied.

Yamaboshi High School’s traditional fall semester event consisted of a field trip in which each first-year class was allowed to choose their destination and planned activities. They had been talking about it every homeroom period for quite a while now; this would be the last time.

“Ugh, what a drag... Whatever we do, it’s just a stupid hike. The only reason we’re ‘allowed’ to choose is ‘cuz the teachers are too lazy to do it themselves.”

“Who are you to complain? You haven’t contributed hardly at all.”

“No need when we’ve got the illustrious Queen Fujishima on our side! Man, she is looking *radiant* today.”

Watase had a bad case of mentionitis when it came to Fujishima. Was he a masochist or something?

“Since when is she your ‘Queen,’ anyhow?” Taichi asked, glancing over at the girl in question. As usual, today she wore her hair tied back, with her bangs neatly pinned up.

“Now then, this year’s main event will be a cooking competition. We’ll split into teams to determine who here can cook the best curry!” Fujishima declared. Their class advisor, Gotou Ryuuzen, had given her full authority over the event, and clearly she wasn’t about to let it go to waste. “There will be eight teams of five students each. Admittedly I would have liked to go with a full ten teams, but as we’ll be sharing the facilities with Class 1-A, there just isn’t enough room.”

All at once, the class began to give feedback for (read: gripe about) her decision.

“That’s way too many teams!”

“Why can’t we have more people?”

“Are you hearing yourselves right now?” Fujishima scoffed, shaking her head in exaggerated disbelief. “Yes, in the scrapbook of life it is certainly important to fill a page or two with friendship and fun. But is that really enough? Isn’t there something we’re all forgetting?”



The class fell silent, absorbed in her sermon.

“Yes, you all know what I’m referring to... Romance!” she declared, pointing ostentatiously into the distance like a detective naming the true culprit of a heinous crime. “The fewer members to a team, the more closely you will be forced to work together to achieve your goal. And by splitting the class into eight, this prevents us from taking refuge in giant all-girl or all-boy teams. Your task will bring you together... sparking feelings for each other... skin against skin... Yes, this is a rare chance for teenage love to blossom... and you people want to throw it all away?! Now, let me ask you again... Are you *sure* you want to reduce the number of teams?”

“EIGHT TEAMS, PLEASE, LADY FUJISHIMA!” a large number of male classmates shouted back, including Watase.

Was she always like this? Taichi found himself wondering. For some reason he seemed to remember her being more... studious and boring... Actually, come to think of it, he couldn’t recall ever seeing her studious side...

“Very well. Now then, our class happens to have precisely twenty boys and twenty girls. So, we’ll have four teams of three boys and two girls, and four teams of three girls and two boys. If you prefer, you can form same-gender groups of two or three and match up with each other from there. Or else I’ll match you up myself. Go!” she commanded, and with that, the students began to move around the room, chattering excitedly.

Meanwhile, Taichi contemplated his next move. He could probably find a guy or two to team up with, but what about girls? Should he join up with Nagase and Inaba to prevent any major incidents? But... wasn’t preventing those incidents precisely the reason he was *avoiding* them right now?

Stop. I can’t overthink this or else—

A vision of Nagase crashing headfirst into the locker flickered through his mind.

Ultimately it hadn’t been a big deal at all. It hadn’t even left a scratch. But what if they’d been standing somewhere else? Next to a window, for example?

“Let’s team up, Yaegashi,” Watase suggested.

“...Sure, sounds good,” Taichi nodded.

“As for the girls... I want to team up with Fujishima-san!”

“...Uhhh...”

“Oh, I get it. I bet you want to team up with Nagase and Inaba like you always do. Well, too bad! You guys can go have fun in your clubroom whenever you want!” Watase seized Taichi by the shoulders, his gaze intent. “Help a brother out for once, would you? I’ll make it up to you by telling you all the best places to take a girl on a date!”

Unable to find a solution—unable to even think of *any* solution—Taichi decided the next best thing would be to change the subject to literally anything else. “The CRC’s not all it’s cracked up to be, alright? Anyway, listen, Watase. I know you’re popular and get a lot of dates and all, but trust me, Fujishima is more than you can handle.”

“Says you! That’s why I like her! What makes you some great authority on Fujishima-san, anyway?”

“Well... I’ve had... some experiences with her,” Taichi answered vaguely, glancing around the classroom. His gaze landed on Nagase and Inaba a few desks away.

“We should probably stick together, right, Inaban?”

“I told you, *stay away from me*,” Inaba snapped.

“E-Excuse me? I really don’t appreciate the attitude,” Nagase shot back.

This could get ugly.

“It’s for your own good.”

“L-Look, I’m just trying to help you—”

“Yeah, well, you’re going about it the wrong way.”

“*You don’t know that!*” Nagase shouted, and several people nearby looked at her in alarm.

The tension in the air was now spreading through the room. Was Nagase Liberated? Should he go stop them? But... if he were to get in between them—

“I told you, don’t get all emotional, dumbass! Tch... Now get lost.” Inaba’s tone was biting cold, made even worse with the knowledge that she *wasn’t* Liberated.

Nagase gritted her teeth. She looked to be on the verge of tears.

“I’m... gonna go wash my face,” she muttered to no one in particular before walking out into the hall.

Silence descended over the room.

Taichi knew he needed to go after her this time. He jumped to his feet.

“Nagase!”

But before he could take another step, a voice rang out across the room.

“I’ll be forming a team with Inaba-san and Nagase-san.” It was none other than class president Fujishima Maiko.

Inaba rounded on her. “What the hell?!”

“I need you and Nagase-san to get along or else it’ll spoil the fun for the whole class.”

“It is *none* of your business!” Inaba roared furiously. So much for her perfect self-control.

“Oh, but it *is*. You see, it’s my job as president to maintain an atmosphere of love and peace within our class.”

Love and peace? She was starting to sound like a superhero.

“So what? You have no right to decide for me!”

“Sure I do. I’m class president.” Fujishima turned to look in his direction.

“Does that sound good to you, Yaegashi-kun?”

“Wh-What?!” Taichi yelped in a strangled voice. He hadn’t expected to be roped into this conversation.

“Let’s see... You’re partnered with Watase-kun, yes? Perfect. Then that makes five. You don’t mind all of us teaming up, do you?”

“Wh-Why are you asking m—”

“Hush.”

Were you asking my consent or not?!

Fujishima had turned into something of a wild card as of late. Inaba clucked her tongue in frustration.

Meanwhile, Watase put his hand on Taichi’s shoulder. “Yaegashi, my man, I’m gonna buy you a drink! No, make that two!”



Homeroom period ended, and school let out for the day.

Taichi looked over at Inaba to find her walking over to Nagase. She said something, though he couldn’t hear exactly what, then promptly turned and walked away.

“Inaban!” Nagase called after her, but to no avail. Inaba ignored her and left.

Nagase’s shoulders slumped so hard, Taichi could see it from halfway across the room. Then her bookbag slid off her arm and hit the floor. As she lethargically stooped to grab it, she suddenly looked up. Their eyes met.

Taichi hastily averted his gaze... then immediately regretted it.

Why did I do that?

Worse, he’d waited until after she’d already caught him, almost like he was intentionally rubbing it in her face. Just because he was keeping his distance didn’t mean he had to ignore her. He needed to get his priorities straight.

He stared down at his desk in contemplation for a moment, then looked up—just in time to see Nagase slinking from the room, utterly defeated.

At first, he felt the impulse to call out to her and reassure her, but then he wondered if it was just his own selfish desire to avoid seeing her suffer...

And so he sank into self-loathing.

Taichi sat in the classroom until he was the last person there.

According to the clock on the wall, it was well past 4 PM. Some students had gone off to take part in their club activities, while the rest had gone home for

the day.

He knew he needed to just go home where it was safe... and yet he couldn't bring himself to get to his feet.

As he sat there, staring blankly into space, the classroom door slid open and Gotou Ryuuzen, advisor to Class 1-C and supervisor for the CRC, walked in.

«Heartseed»?!

"Oh, hey, Yaegashi. Whatcha doing here all by yourself?"

No, it wasn't «Heartseed». Just regular old Gotou.

"Oh, nothing much," Taichi answered.

Gotou walked to the front of the room. "Get a load of this. Supposedly one of the other teachers has been complaining about the lectern in here. Said it's too wobbly. So when I went to ask for a new one, you know what they told me? 'Go get it yourself!' Can you believe that? That's not my job, y'know? Technically I could just wait for someone else to do it, but *you-know-who* has a class in here tomorrow. Noisy old windbag." He hefted the lectern up off the ground, then paused and looked at him. "Say, you look bored. Help me out."

And so it was that Taichi got press ganged into carrying a lectern with his teacher.

He kept his face pointed in the direction they were headed, careful not to look at Gotou. Gotou himself hadn't done anything wrong, but, well... whenever Taichi saw his face, he was viscerally reminded of «Heartseed». It wasn't pleasant.

"Man, I'm so glad you were around! Woulda been dangerous carrying this thing on the stairs all by myself."

"Yeah," Taichi answered absently. Normally he was capable of keeping Gotou and «Heartseed» separate in his head, but right now he was so agitated, he was afraid he might lash out.

They turned a corner and headed into another wing of the building.

"So." Gotou's tone had shifted ever so slightly. "You're feeling a little

depressed lately, huh?”

Taichi was so caught off-guard, he nearly dropped his end of the lectern. Hastily, he secured his grip once more. “N-No, I’m not...”

“...He says, with a look on his face like somebody killed his dog. I’m not buying it, buddy. Let me guess... You got rejected, yeah? Was it Nagase? Inaba? No, wait... maybe Kiriya?”

“I was *not* rejected,” he answered flatly. He was getting really sick of people turning everything in his life into a romance thing.

“You ought to talk to your friends about it.”

“What?”

It was such an... earnest, teacher-like suggestion. Taichi couldn’t believe his ears.

“I said, *talk to your friends*! Oh, did you think I was gonna give you advice? No can do. I’m not interested in your little teenage love life.” Before Taichi could find a response, he added, “I find that talking to your friends tends to solve most things,” in a low voice.

For once, he wasn’t the incompetent nitwit that half-assed his teaching job. For once, he was a decent, trustworthy adult.

Before he knew it, his guard was down, and the words left his lips before he could stop them.

“But... if I talk to them about it, I might hurt them.”

In all their discussions about Kiriya, no one had come out unscathed.

“Oh, please. Look, sometimes you’re gonna cause problems and hurt each other. Isn’t that what being friends is all about?”

What?

Taichi looked at him in surprise. Gotou looked back with incredulity.

“How would talking to your friends hurt them, anyway? Oh, wait, I know... Must be a love triangle sort of thing...” He nodded to himself without seeking any kind of confirmation. “Well, in any case, you can’t run from it forever. You

gotta tell them, face to face. If they're really your friends, they'll understand. Granted, sometimes these things don't go perfectly according to plan, but I'm telling you, if you keep it all bottled inside and let it fester, you're gonna regret it for the rest of your life. Easier to just take a chance and get it over with."

Not too optimistic, yet not too risk-averse. Just... trusting that everything will work out and taking steps from there.

Gotou had his full attention now.

"Because, yeah, you might screw up, but you gotta be honest with them. Otherwise it's not real friendship, y'know? It's like... how do I put this... If you spend all your time walking on eggshells, you'll lose sight of the real important stuff."

The words sank deep into Taichi's heart.

"Man, that was a real teacher moment just now, huh? Am I cool or what?"

"You *were*. Until you pointed it out."

"Aw, c'mon! You were supposed to say 'You're the best, sensei!' Throw me a bone, would you?" He glanced over at a passing student. "Hey, Fujishima! What are you up to?"

"I'm just on a minor errand for the upcoming field trip. I see you've been tasked with something as well? Your hard work is appreciated, as always," Fujishima answered politely.

"Eh, I do what I can. Say, Fujishima, think you could try to help Yaegashi with his problems?"

"*What?*" Taichi and Fujishima exclaimed in unison.

"He's struggling with something right now, and I just got done explaining to him the importance of reaching out to his friends. So, could you be a friend and hear him out?"

"Listen here, sensei. I understand that you're the class advisor and I'm the class president, but don't you think you're putting a little too much on me? And another thing—Yaegashi-kun is *not* my friend. He is my respected rival."

Apparently she had promoted him to rival status.

“Say *what*?! Wait, are you part of his love triangle thing?! Good gravy, this sounds complicated... Teenagers are getting more progressive these days, I guess... Well then, if you’re involved, then that’s all the more reason for you guys to talk it out. Alright, you kids have fun! Buh-bye!”

“G-Gossan! Wait!” Taichi shouted, but naturally he wasn’t listening. Instead, Gotou hefted the lectern out of Taichi’s arms and hurried away, unsloved by the massive misunderstanding he took with him.

With that, Taichi and Fujishima were left standing in the middle of the now-deserted hallway.

“That was weird... Well, whatever. Tell me, Yaegashi-kun. What are you struggling with?” Fujishima asked, adjusting her glasses.

“Nothing, really...” He couldn’t think of anything he felt comfortable confiding in her about. Worse, he had already come close to hurting her once before, so he was probably better off keeping his distance— *No, stop*.

Something told him he was going about this the wrong way.

“Nothing? I won’t force you to tell me, obviously... Oh, I know. Does it have something to do with Inaba-san or Nagase-san, perhaps?”

“Nngh...” He knew it had to be written all over his face.

“Oho. In that case, in the interest of upholding love and peace in Class 1-C, I’m afraid I must intervene. What happened? *Tell me*.” Behind her glasses, the look in her eyes suggested she wouldn’t be taking no for an answer.

Taichi knew he couldn’t get out of this until he came clean. Plus... he had the feeling he might actually get closer to a solution if he opened up a little.

It was nice to feel *hopeful* for a change. The thorns in his heart didn’t feel quite so sharp... and maybe that meant he was safe to be around, Liberated or not.

He decided to ask her the same thing he’d asked Gotou.

“Fujishima, what would you do if... if you knew talking about something with someone would hurt them?”

At the end of his question, she sighed heavily, like she was baffled that she

had to even explain it. “Then just don’t talk to them about it?”

“Oh, uh... I think I phrased the question wrong. What if you have to talk to them because it’s getting in the way of something else?”

“Then talk to them, I guess?”

“No, I mean, you have to talk to them, but you know it might hurt them—”

“Okay, well, let me ask you this, Yaegashi-kun. Which is more important: not hurting the other person, or talking it out so you can move on? What is your goal here? What is it that you truly care about above all else? Have you given it any thought?”

Her rapid-fire questions hit him like a spray of bullets.

“As long as you know what truly matters to you, all that’s left is to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. You’d be surprised, though—these things have the tendency to work themselves out, strangely enough. Likewise, if you can’t get your priorities straight, then there’s often not much else that can be done.”

She smiled slightly. Considering she typically carried herself with a steely countenance at all times, part of him almost didn’t feel right seeing it... but another part of him was captivated.

“Full disclosure, I believe we humans are designed to hurt each other. That said, you’re free to agree or disagree as you see fit.”

Designed to hurt each other. She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

But before anything else could be said, her bookbag began to buzz loudly. “Oh, sorry. Just a minute,” she told him as she pulled out her cell phone. “Hello? Oh, hi... What’s the matter? Uh huh... Hmm... Relationship troubles, is it? Just leave it to me.”

Evidently their beloved class president was quite the busy woman.

“Okay. Talk to you later.” Fujishima closed her flip phone and looked back at Taichi. “Sorry to cut this short, but I need to go take care of something. Did you have any other questions?”

“...Nah, I’ll be fine. You should get going.”

“Alright. In that case, I’ll be leaving now. Just remember, if you need me, you know where to look. I’m more than happy to help, especially if it’s something that will affect our class.” With that, she turned and strode down the hall.

Damn, she’s cool...

“What kind of badass *are* you, Fujishima?” Taichi asked playfully.

“Me, badass?” She turned back to look at him, her ponytail fluttering behind her. “Hmmm...” Then she slid her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “I prefer to think of myself as... an apostle of love.”

As usual, she said it with such a straight face, you’d think she wasn’t joking.

Taichi watched her go until she disappeared around the corner at the stairs. With that, he was now alone in the hallway... but strangely enough, he didn’t feel alone at all.

Just then, the school intercom crackled to life.

“Gotou-sensei, please report to the staff room immediately. I repeat...”

Uh-oh. Wonder if there was a staff meeting he forgot about or something.

Taichi exhaled slowly, then turned and walked off down the hall.

Ever since «Heartseed» had started forcing its supernatural phenomena on them, the CRC would often brainstorm amongst themselves in order to find solutions to their problems. That was the obvious course to take, considering the nature of their circumstances. At the same time, however... the five of them weren’t the only people on the planet. There were so many other people in the background of their lives—people who influenced them, helped them, or dealt with the problems they caused. And the world around them was built on these social bonds.

At last, Taichi remembered the thing he’d nearly forgotten—the most obvious thing of all.



Alone, Taichi walked into Rec Hall Room 401.

In reality it had only been a few days, and yet somehow it felt like years since he'd last visited.

He sat down on the black three-seater sofa and stared at the empty folding chairs positioned around the two tables. It had now been two full weeks since the last time all five of them had gathered here.

He took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. He needed to figure out his next move.

Before now, he would always hesitate, worried about the impulses he might trigger if he spent too much time thinking alone. But now things were different. Now he wasn't worried about that at all.

He was still scared, of course. Whenever he felt the urge to help someone, he often stopped caring about anything else—including whether he might hurt someone in the process. It was risky... but in that moment, he finally felt like he was on the verge of a breakthrough. Thanks to Gotou and Fujishima, there was a light at the end of the tunnel, and he needed to keep it in his sights, lest he forget what mattered most.

And so Taichi began to think.

Right now, he was keeping his distance from the rest of the CRC. Why? Because he didn't want to hurt them. His fight-or-flight response had chosen flight. But was that truly the best option?

They wouldn't be able to keep running forever. Eventually the only option would be for all of them to isolate themselves. Sure, it was possible they might be able to wait it out until the Liberation phenomenon ended... but there was no guarantee that it would, and either way time was against them. With all of this building stress, someone was going to snap. It was only a matter of when.

That was the one thing they needed to avoid above all else.

So... what was it that he cared about most?

Lately he'd been entirely focused on not hurting anyone. Of course, this wasn't a bad thing in and of itself; it was perfectly natural to seek to avoid hurting those around you. But was that his ultimate goal? Was that all he wanted? Was that his purpose in life?

No. Of course not. So why was he so desperate not to hurt anyone?

Well, because they were his friends. Because he cared about them. Sure, there was a part of him deep down that didn't want to have to see anyone suffer. That much was fact. But his life goal was not to simply avoid hurting anyone.

Why was he so miserable right now? How could he resolve it? What was it that he really wanted?

Maybe he just... wanted to be with his friends, like always.

Kiriyama's emotional trauma had caused her to isolate herself. At first, the rest of them tried to fix the problem, but then they fought and ultimately fell apart.

So what was the best course of action? What was the ideal outcome? What did he want more than anything?

—For the four of them to reunite and get Kiriyama out of her house.

Wasn't that their ultimate goal? It was obviously the most ideal option. So why wasn't he working towards it?

He had messed up. He had forgotten. He had lost sight of what was truly important.

Playing defense would only lead to an unwinnable battle of attrition. He needed to get aggressive. "The best defense is a good offense," as the saying went.

He hated seeing people get hurt. Seeing them suffer. He hated it more than anything else, and this always led him to want to sacrifice something else in order to stop it—that was just the sort of self-important asshole he was.

Were self-important assholes allowed to want the things he wanted? He didn't know.

But he could always just ask.

Even if the phenomenon had made a mess of everything, he could just set the record straight.

But would the others accept his request?

One by one, their faces floated through his mind—Nagase, Inaba, Kiriya, then Aoki. He wanted to be with them. He wanted to hang out with them here in the clubroom. Maybe it was selfish, but it was what he yearned for more than anything.

Now for the million dollar question: What did *they* want?



Taichi decided he would start by contacting the one member of the CRC who wasn't actively keeping their distance from the others—Nagase Iori.

Supposedly she was still somewhere on campus. Now he sat in the clubroom, waiting for her. She would probably be here any minute— The door flew open with a loud *BANG*.

"T-Taichi!" Nagase shouted, shoulders heaving as she gasped for breath.

"H-Hey... You didn't have to rush straight up here, you know..."

She doubled over, hands on her knees. "Well... you... said you... wanted to talk..."

Taichi decided to give her a minute to catch her breath. She looked like she needed it.

A moment of silence passed—well, save for Nagase's heavy breathing.

Now that she was actually standing here, Taichi felt his fear creep up all over again. He could make all the excuses in the world—*I never meant to; if only I hadn't been Liberated*—but that still didn't erase the fact that he had hurt her. Plus, he'd nearly hurt Fujishima as well. That was the inescapable truth.

There was nothing more terrible than physical violence. And for what he'd done, he was a terrible person. Even if Liberation was to blame for him acting on his impulses, the bottom line was that it was *his* impulse.

Whenever he was overcome with one single emotion or desire, he would lose sight of all else—including the consequences of his actions. That was just the kind of person he was.

But maybe that didn't have to be a bad thing.

"So... what's up?" Nagase asked after she'd finally caught her breath.

Taichi looked straight at her, and she looked back, eyes glittering like jewels. She didn't try to run. Instead, she stood her ground, waiting to see what this moment held.

Would she accept his plan?

"Nagase, there's something I want to say... Recently I've come to realize just how selfish and stubborn I am. The second I form an opinion on something, I commit to it one hundred percent and refuse to consider anything else. Not only that... I never admit when I'm wrong, either."

Because of this, he'd hurt Inaba, fought with Aoki, and ultimately hurt Nagase too.

She continued to listen quietly as he spoke.

"Ultimately... I'm just an egomaniac."

It was something he knew he needed to accept.

"So yeah... You probably already know this, but... I convinced myself that a jackass like me was better off staying away so I wouldn't hurt anyone."

He had messed up, and it had destroyed him inside.

"But... while we were apart, I realized... the truth is, I want to be with you guys."

Was it really that selfish?

"But like I said, I'm an egomaniac. I can promise I'll do everything I can to prevent my stupid narcissism from hurting anybody, but it'll probably happen eventually."

Could he possibly go through his whole life without hurting a single person?

"And I really hate that about myself, you know? Like, obviously nobody enjoys getting hurt, but... God, I just want to be with you guys so bad..."

The club meant so much to him.

“So I’ve decided: If being with you guys means we might hurt each other, then that’s a risk I’ll just have to take. So... if you’re willing...”

Ask her.

“If you’ll consent to the possibility that you might get a little hurt now and then...”

Ask her.

“...can we still be friends?”

How would she feel about it?

For a moment she simply stared back.

Then she sniffled. Her lip twitched. Her brows furrowed. Tears welled in her eyes.

“Wh... uhh... Hey now...!” Taichi stammered. He hadn’t expected to make her cry.

The next moment, she collapsed to the floor. “You’re such a jerk, Taichi!”

“I... Listen... uhh... Sorry, um... I should’ve phrased it better—”

“That’s not it!” Nagase yelled. She hung her head. “All this time, I tried my best to get everyone to stay together, even when they told me to go away! I told myself I’d go to Yui’s house with or without you guys! And I did!”

Then it finally hit him.

He had been keeping his distance to prevent his friends from getting hurt—and yet he failed to notice Nagase suffering right in front of him. He’d been trying to keep their best interests in mind, but ultimately his actions hadn’t benefited anyone at all.

“Then I started thinking... if you guys are all so sure we’re just going to hurt each other, then maybe the club’s just destined to fall apart...” She looked up at him. Her eyes were red, but she wasn’t crying. “But now you turn around and say we should just go for it anyway? You really think that’ll work?”

He didn’t know. It would depend entirely on how she and the others felt about it.

She stared down at the floor for a moment, then looked up again... and grinned.

“Works for me, I guess.”

Taichi smiled for what felt like the first time in years. He held out his hand, and she took it. He pulled her to her feet, and for a moment they gazed at each other, less than an arm’s length apart.

A moment later, they bashfully averted their eyes and stepped out of each other’s bubble. Maybe it was a little early to be getting that close.

“S-So... Are you gonna go give that speech to everyone else and drag them back here?” Nagase asked, her cheeks pink.

“Yeah. That’s the plan.”

It was what he wanted more than anything. Surely the others felt the same way deep down; Taichi was convinced they did, though he couldn’t be certain. So, what was the best way to find out for sure? The answer was painfully simple: *ask*.

“Gotcha... But aw man, this sucks. I was trying my best to solve this thing, but now you’re totally gonna steal my thunder,” Nagase pouted.

“Oops...”

“Just messing with you, silly! I’m not really mad about it. As long as one of us puts this thing to rest, y’know?”

Just when he thought their relationship was dead in the water, one touch was all it took to get things moving again. As it turned out, the distance hadn’t damaged anything.

“Anyway, what was it you called yourself a minute ago? An egomaniac?”

“Y-Yeah?”

“I agree.”

“Gwah?!”

It stung a lot more coming from someone else.

“Either way, though... you still try to do the right thing most of the time, even

if you tend to go about it the wrong way. Like... how do I put this..." She tilted her head in thought. "You never hesitate, even when you should. Like a stubborn old grandpa."

"M-Mostly the stubborn part, right? I don't come off as old, right?"

He'd become a little over-sensitive to comments like that ever since his kid sister had called him a "grumpy old man."

She laughed. "Welllll... Maybe a little!"

It made him feel whole again, chatting with Nagase after so long. Somehow the Liberation didn't seem like such a big deal anymore. Maybe its effects wouldn't be as drastic as he'd feared.

"Anyway... I never thought *you* of all people would suggest we risk hurting each other."

"I mean, I'm not crazy about the idea, obviously! I just... I feel like we're all going to be even more miserable if we stay like this... Maybe that's why."

He didn't entirely understand it, but he knew one thing for certain: right now, his desire to stay with his friends outweighed all else. Maybe it was proof of just how important they were to him.

"Oh yeah... uh... I wanted to apologize again. You know, for knocking you into the locker."

Nagase's expression clouded over slightly. "How many times are you going to apologize over the same thing? It was just a stupid accident! And you were Liberated anyways!"

She had a point, but... somehow it just never felt like enough.

"But I—"

"*Taichi*," Nagase interrupted. "What happened to 'sometimes we just have to risk it'?"

"...Okay, but this is different!"

"Hmm... If you say so... Well, either way, it's fine! I'm over it, okay? Just try to be more careful next time." She smiled at him gently.

“You’re right... I guess I just need to make sure it doesn’t happen again...”

“Yup!”

“But I’m not sure if I can... No, I will. I have to.”

Just because they were willing to accept the possibility of hurting each other didn’t make it okay to stop caring altogether. They still needed to put in effort to avoid it. Whether the Liberation would negate that effort, it was hard to say—but with a little extra mindfulness, maybe the worst case scenario could be mitigated.

So, what sort of person was Taichi? What sort of person did he want to be?

“Well then, mister, sounds like we’ve got a job to do! One down, three to go!” Nagase grinned.

It was precisely the motivation he needed to push forward.

“Damn right. I want us all to hang out here again, and I’m going to make it happen. I think it’s for the best that we do... though ultimately it’s their decision, of course.”

“Alrighty! What’s the plan, Stan? Are we calling them, or—Nah, I guess we should probably talk to them in person... In that case, I wanna go find Inaban. Especially after that fight we had in the classroom today.”

“Right... Okay, then I’ll try to get in touch with Aoki. You two are probably better off talking it out one-on-one. Besides, Aoki and I really got into it the other day, so... I’d like some time alone with him myself.”

“Gotcha. Then that just leaves the final boss... Yui.”

“Yeah.”

Kiriyama had suffered the worst out of all of them, and she likely wouldn’t be swayed by the idea that hurting each other was to an extent inevitable. Still, Taichi had a feeling that if they put their heads together, they could make miracles happen... Once they got the rest of the group back, he wanted to give it one more shot. The Cultural Research Club just wasn’t the same without her.

“Alright then, let’s get going. Hopefully the next time we’re here, it’ll be with everyone.”

“Heck yeah!”

The two of them shared a hearty fist bump.



When Aoki answered the phone, Taichi begged him to meet up in person so they could talk. Aoki sounded a little startled by his desperation, but he agreed nonetheless. And so, unwilling to waste even a single second, he headed straight over to Aoki’s neighborhood.

They met at the riverbank near the train station. Aoki was still in his school uniform; when he spotted Taichi, he smiled awkwardly and waved.

“Hey... Long time no talk,” Taichi called out as he jogged over. It had only been four days, but with all the emotional distance between them, it had felt like an agonizing eternity.

“Yeah, for sure.” Aoki averted his gaze. Ordinarily he radiated goofy, lighthearted energy at any given moment, but now the mood in the air was different.

Taichi couldn’t remember the last time things between them had felt this tense. He’d dashed all the way over here on a whim, but now he found himself hesitating, overcome with fear at the possibility of what he might say or do or even *think*. What if he messed up again? What if they fought?

The Liberation would bring everything to the surface... but if there was even a tiny chance that they could still be friends despite that, then this phenomenon was nothing they couldn’t handle.

—Who the hell do you think you are, Taichi?! You think you can do anything, is that it?!

It made him sad to know that Aoki thought of him that way, but at the same time, it was the undiluted truth. This led him to decide that if Aoki didn’t like him, then he was better off keeping his distance. But in his heart, Taichi still wanted to be friends.

So what was it that Aoki wanted, ultimately?

“Listen, Aoki... I said some pretty awful crap the other day. I was arrogant and

self-centered, and I convinced myself that I was in the right... and that I was all-powerful. But I was wrong... and I know it won't undo what I've done, but I still want to apologize. I'm really sorry."

Taichi bowed his head, and for a moment, Aoki didn't respond.

Silence fell between them.

Confused, Taichi timidly glanced up.

He found Aoki clutching his hair in his fists. He turned towards the river and screamed at the top of his lungs— "AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH! GODDAMN IT! YOU BEAT ME TO IT! GAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

"Damn, man, keep it down! People are staring at us!" Taichi hissed.

Aoki shot him a goofy grin. "Let's sit down for a bit, Taichi. Just two guys, talkin' it out on the riverbank while the sun sets in the background... Sounds like a scene out of a movie, am I right?"

Like he asked, Taichi sat down next to him on the grass.

The flowing river glittered beneath the rays of the setting sun as a light breeze brushed against his cheek. It was getting late, but the temperature was just right.

"Man... To tell the truth, I was thinkin' about apologizin' too... but the second I got your call, I knew you'd beat me to the punch." He laughed. "Sorry for, y'know, ignorin' your email and stuff. I just... Well... That thing Iori-chan said about me really hurt, dude. It kinda destroyed me, actually. I mean, not that I'm blamin' her or anything... It just stung 'cuz I knew she was totally right."

"I can relate to that..." Taichi muttered.

"No, seriously. I mean, you always help everyone, and I'm just kinda *there*. Who wouldn't be jealous of you? But there I was, tryin' to pretend I wasn't. Classic me, am I right? And the worst part is... I was tryin' my best to put Yui's needs first, but then it turned out I was only ever thinkin' of myself. I was *crushed*."

"Nah, man, I just got lucky. Besides, you weren't the only one using KiriYama as a pretext."

The two of them sighed in unison.

“Look, Taichi... I’m really sorry, dude. I got stupidly jealous and said some pretty messed-up stuff. I know I hurt you, but if you’re willin’ to forgive me—”

“It’s fine, Aoki. You were completely right about me, and I need to come to terms with that.”

Ultimately, Aoki had seen just what sort of person he was.

“Listen... I know I can be a little full of myself, and I can’t promise that’ll be the last fight we ever have, but... will you still be a part of my life? There are so many more memories I want to make with you.”

Aoki stared at him for a moment, blinking. “Huh? Didja even need to ask? But... that phrasing. Why’d you make it sound all romantic?! I don’t swing that way, bro!”

“Me either, genius!”

The two of them burst out laughing.

“Man, I’m so pathetic... I went and took my frustration out on you for no reason, and then *you* apologized to *me*...” Aoki sighed.

“Like I said, you were right about me, though.”

“Nah, think about it. Deep down, you were desperate to help Yui no matter the cost, weren’tcha? That’s pretty awesome, if you ask me. And if you hadn’t been Liberated, I know you woulda been a little more careful not to hurt anybody.”

“That’s putting a positive spin on it, I guess... You’re hardly any different, though. I mean, you’re *always* thinking of Kiriyama.”

“Yeah, I guess... Maybe I’m just doin’ it for my own selfish reasons, but... I think maybe it’s just not possible to be completely altruistic, y’know? You’d have to be a saint to manage that,” Aoki muttered quietly as he gazed out into the distance.

As it turned out, sometimes Aoki could be really deep. While at first glance he seemed like a brainless buffoon, in actuality he had a pretty solid grasp of the stuff that really mattered.

In the end, they were all just kids. They couldn't live their whole lives dedicated purely to someone else. And they needed to accept that.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. Maybe we've all got our own selfish reasons. But when it comes down to it—"

"—we all still wanna help Yui, right?" Aoki cut in. He slapped his thigh. "Alrighty then! Let's try one more brainstormin' sesh! Oh, wait... But what if we get Liberated partway through like last time...? Hmm... Actually, nah, I think we'll be okay this time."

"Yeah... Speaking of..." Taichi began, then shook his head. "On second thought, never mind."

He'd been about to suggest that he get in touch with Nagase to find out how things with Inaba were going and/or possibly arrange a meetup somewhere, but he changed his mind at the last second. If Nagase was struggling, she would have called him by now.

If he and Aoki worked together, he had a feeling they could move mountains. If they managed to help Kiriya recover, awesome! If not, they could cross that bridge when they came to it. Plus, they could always ask the others for help.

"First things first, I guess we should figure out how to help Yui—nah, that sounds too conceited. Let's figure out what we want from her," Aoki declared.

"I still think she needs to leave her house. There's just no telling when this phenomenon will end."

Worst case scenario, she could keep her distance from them and stop coming to the clubroom if that was her preference. But skipping school and hiding out in her room at home was absolutely not healthy.

"I just hope nobody gets hurt..."

"Hmmm..."

Together they racked their brains.

"You know... This might be stating the obvious, but... I don't think we can do this all on our own. We need Kiriya to cooperate with us on this."

“Preach it, brother...”

Ideally they needed to find a solution for the root of the problem, but that was proving difficult under their current circumstances. They needed Kiriya to shoulder some of the risk with them.

“We know for sure that we can limit the effects of the Liberation as long as we keep an eye on our emotional state... although it’s not foolproof...”

“Yeah, and that’s kinda the problem,” Aoki replied. He was right, of course.

“Maybe we can stop her from lashing out if we just keep an eye on her...?”

“This is Yui we’re talkin’ about. You really think we can hold her back?”

...They didn’t stand a chance against a former karate prodigy.

“Well, maybe we ought to just tell her she’ll be fine as long as she keeps her emotions in check!” Taichi pressed.

“What? Dude, how can you be that naive? Is your brain even workin’ right now?”

“I can’t believe I’m getting schooled by *Aoki* of all people...”

It was pretty gutting.

“Man, you’re so dense, it’s a miracle you were able to help her with her phobia at all... Then again, your plan *was* kind of genius... Seriously, how do you come up with this stuff?”

“Well, at the time, I just figured... if the body-swap could create all these problems, maybe it had some practical use as a solution, too.”

“Jesus, dude, that optimism of yours is something else! You flipped the whole thing on its head!” Aoki tilted his head back and laughed. “I sure wish this one could solve—”

Cutting himself off, he collapsed back against the grass. His hands shot straight into the air. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?” Taichi asked.

“I... I think I just got an idea!”

“R-Really?!”

“Really really! I’m not sure if it’ll work, though... Just gimme a minute to figure out how to explain it! Ngh... If only Inabacchan was here... I bet she could totally BS her way into a sound argument...”

At this, Taichi immediately thought of a response, then debated whether to actually say it out loud. It probably wasn’t something to be proud of, but it fit the overall tone of the moment... so in the end, he decided to go for it.

“They say I’m pretty good at it, too, you know.”



With their doubts cleared away, Taichi and Aoki decided that there was no time like the present.

They arrived at the Kiriya residence that evening, a bit later than they usually would have visited. Outside, they encountered Kiriya’s mother and had a brief chat with her. As it turned out, she’d forgotten to buy something at the grocery store and was headed back to get it.

Scarcely more than a week had passed since the last time Taichi had spoken with her, and yet she was looking visibly more emaciated. The change was readily apparent, even to a near-total stranger like him. He could only imagine the emotional toll this was taking on her... The rest of the family was probably worried sick, too. Taichi knew he needed to help Kiriya for their sake as much as her own.

They asked for permission to go inside, and Mrs. Kiriya happily allowed it. From there, they headed upstairs to Kiriya’s room. Taichi was a little surprised to find the house empty—or rather, surprised Kiriya’s mother would allow two boys to visit her daughter unsupervised. On the other hand, it came as a huge relief. Considering the nature of the conversation they were about to have, the last thing they needed was for anyone to overhear them.

When they reached Kiriya’s bedroom door, he and Aoki exchanged a look. Their plan was... well, it was really something. In more ways than one. Aoki gave him a firm nod, his steely countenance reminiscent of a soldier conscripted into the war, and Taichi nodded back. Then Aoki raised his hand and knocked on the

door.

“...Who is it?” Kiriyaama asked weakly from inside.

“It’s me and Taichi.”

“...Come in.”

Following their first visit, Kiriyaama had stopped trying to bar their entry. This was now their third time stopping by her house.

With her consent granted, they entered her bedroom, the bright colors and cutesy decorations now a familiar sight, the whimsical femininity a stark contrast to the dull gloom that hung in the air.

Kiriyaama was deathly pale. She looked utterly exhausted, almost on the brink of collapse, like a sputtering flame on a candle wick—a mere shadow of her formerly energetic self.

Taichi was the first to speak. “So, uh... Long time no talk, huh?”

“Yeah...” she replied, though her voice was almost too quiet to hear.

“Come outside with us, Yui,” Aoki said without so much as a hello. He hadn’t even taken a seat. “You can come back to school now. It’ll be okay.”

There would be no mind games. No tricks. The two of them weren’t that clever to begin with.

“Ooooh my god... Not this stupid crap again... I already told you... How can I possibly go outside when I could punch someone’s lights out at any time...?” Her expression twisted bitterly. “I know Inaba’s right, but I just...”

“I know. I get it. But if you stay cooped up like this, it could ruin your whole life,” Taichi said.

“But... but...!” Kiriyaama hung her head and mumbled the word to herself over and over.

So far, this was no different from last time or the time before that.

Here was where the real battle began.

Taichi took a step back. He wasn’t the star of the show today; that was all Aoki. Today his role was to watch them from the sidelines and lend his support

as needed. After all, this message would mean nothing if it didn't come from Aoki Yoshifumi himself.

"You're overthinkin' this, Yui. You've already learned your lesson, so you'll be fine, I promise. You won't punch anybody. And even if you find yourself wanting to do it, I know you can hold back!" Aoki declared, his voice firm, as if bolstered by Taichi's wordless encouragement.

"G-Give me a break... You can't 'hold back' once you're Liberated... You and I both know that..."

"No, for real, you can! Even if you really wanna punch 'em, as long as you got an even *bigger* desire to *not* punch 'em, it'll cancel out!" Aoki was expressing himself not only with his words, but his whole body.

"But... that stuff doesn't matter when you're Liberated... Once you 'desire' something, it'll happen whether you try to stop yourself or not... Isn't that how it works?"

"I mean, yes and no!"

"...Excuse me?" Kiriya furrowed her brows and tilted her head.

"Trust me, it doesn't work the way you think it does! You'll be fine!" Aoki insisted.

"...What?" Her brows furrowed even deeper.

Uh oh. Looks like she doesn't get it.

Aoki was so worked up, his explanation wasn't making a ton of sense.

Is this going to work out? Should I step in?

Somehow it was even more nerve-racking to just stand around and let things happen.

"If I can prove to you that you'll be okay—that you can stop yourself from doin' stuff you absolutely don't wanna do—will you promise to leave your house and come to school and hang out in the clubroom?!"

"Wh... huh?! I mean, if I knew I could hold myself back, then—"

She hadn't finished her sentence, but Aoki barreled forward regardless.

“Alrighty then! We got a deal! Let’s do this!” He flashed his pearly whites at her. “Not to brag, but I have big feelings for you. I really like you. Like, a lot. I’m crazy about you.”

In that moment, he was startlingly swoon-worthy. Kiriya herself seemed entirely caught off-guard. She didn’t even blush—just stared back blankly, jaw agape.

“And, again, not to brag, but I’m also fairly... thirsty. Okay, real talk, I’m pretty darn thirsty. Really thirsty. Extremely freakin’ thirsty.”

So much for swoon-worthy.

Granted, it was all part of the plan, but still, it was a crying shame.

“So, if all my horny desires got Liberated... well, honestly... it’d make sense that I’d try to do stuff with you, right? Logically speaking!” Aoki declared with a big smile, all the while sounding like a sex offender.

Kiriya’s face began to flush bright red. “Wh... wh-wh-wh-*what the heck are you talking about, you FREAK?!’*” she screamed, flinging her pillow in his direction.

“Buh?!”

It struck him right in the stomach. Admittedly, it was well earned.

“W-Wait, Yui! Just hear me out!” Aoki straightened his posture. “Uhhh... Where was I... Oh, right! So *logically* I would totally force myself on you... but the thing is, I’d absolutely *never* want to do that to you no matter what! So I’m gonna use that iron-clad willpower of mine to stop the desire right in its tracks!”

It was the sort of statement that only held value because of the Liberation phenomenon.

“You’ll see! Once I show you that I can endure my desire without makin’ a move on you, it’ll be undeniable proof that you can beat the Liberation as long as you believe in yourself!”

The sort of message that only had an impact because it was coming from Aoki.

“Wh... Are you braindead?! That makes no sense! ...Well... Okay, maybe a

little...”

“See?! Okay, Yui, here’s the plan! Let’s make a reservation at a love hotel, and if I manage to keep my paws off you, then you’ll know I’m tellin’ the truth!”

Truth be told, it was a horrifying plan, even to someone like Taichi who wasn’t directly part of it. It made his cheeks burn with shame.

“Hell no! What kind of idiot would purposely put herself at risk like that?!” Kiriya’s voice was growing steadily louder. Evidently she was getting a bit flustered.

“There’s no risk, though! I won’t do anything!”

“But how can you be so *sure*?!” she howled.

Aoki simply gazed at her for a moment. “Because the last thing I wanna do is hurt you. Y’know, ‘cuz I’m in love with you.”

Kiriya froze completely, her expression blank, almost as if she’d forgotten how to react.

“Bottom line is, I’m confident that my desire to not hurt you will trump everything else!”



This was the same guy who, hours earlier, claimed that it was impossible to take action purely for someone else's sake—and now here he was, insisting he *could*, in fact, prioritize another person over himself. He wasn't just saying it in the heat of the moment, either. It was his rational conclusion. He could never claim his love for her was invincible unless he truly believed it from the bottom of his heart; how many other people on this earth could say the same? Certainly not Taichi himself, whose Liberation had caused him to shove Nagase.

Hopefully someday I can get on Aoki's level.

"Oh, and one more thing. There's like a zero percent chance of this happening, but... even if the Liberation were to win somehow, nothin' bad would happen to you regardless. The second I try anything, you can just kick my ass!"

"Th... That's even worse... I... I don't want to hurt anyone... especially not you..." Kiriya forced the words out in a wobbly, tearful voice, her tone soft and bittersweet.

"You won't have to as long as I don't screw this up. But if I do, well... Any guy who forces his desires on other people probably deserves it, y'know? Makes sense to me, at least. But unfortunately for you, I ain't losin' to no Liberation, toots!" Aoki declared boldly, grinning.

Evidently it was a little contagious, because Kiriya smiled too, in spite of her tears. And what a beautiful smile it was, even if her lips were trembling. Somehow the air in the room felt just a little bit warmer.

Meanwhile, Aoki continued his impassioned tirade. "You can even wear a sexy costume if you want! That'll make my argument even more convincing when I win! You could just strip down to your bra and panties, or maybe like a bunnygirl costume, or just wear nothin' but an apron—"

Just as Taichi began to worry Aoki was starting to cross a line—

"Keep your dirty fantasies to yourself, *PERVERT!*"

—Kiriya grabbed a box of tissues off of a nearby shelf and flung it at his face.

“OUCH! Those corners are sharp, damn it!”

“You dumb stupid jerk!”

It was such a classic Aoki and Kiriya interaction that Taichi couldn't help but burst out laughing.

“T-Taichi! This isn't funny, bro!” Having recovered from the blow, Aoki turned to look at him. “Okay, dude, so far so good. Now it's time to seal the deal with some of your devil's advocate BS!”

“Don't call it BS! Call it a crackpot theory if you have to!”

Kiriya exploded into a laughing fit. “Hahaha! Oh my god, you guys are so stupid!”

It felt like eons since the last time Taichi had heard her laugh.

“Hahaha... Ahh, my sides... Whew... Okay, let's hear this BS theory of yours.”

“Oh, come on! Not you too!”

Great. How am I going to say this with a straight face?

“Fine, whatever.” Taichi shook away his annoyance. “Again, full disclaimer, it's just a theory, but... You know how Liberation typically affects whatever desire is strongest at that given moment?”

“Yeah, supposedly.”

“Well... Other than the incident at the train station, have you ever hurt anyone like that at any point in your life?”

“I mean, if you count all that karate I did... Then again, I wasn't, like, hurting them on purpose or anything... So I guess in that sense, the thing at the station was my first real fight...”

“Bingo. I thought as much. So, I'm guessing you had no idea how it felt to really hurt someone until after that fight.”

“Um... No, I guess not...”

“See, but now you understand just how serious it is. Now you're fully aware of how much pain that sort of violence inflicts—not just on the recipient, but yourself, too. After all that, you feel a strong desire to never hurt anyone else

like that ever again.”

As it turned out, sometimes being open with your emotions could lead to pain the likes of which you never knew existed.

“And I’d wager that desire would trump any fleeting impulse you felt to punch someone.”

“W-Well... I definitely feel pretty strongly about it... so I guess you could consider it a ‘desire,’ sort of...”

The logic was sound, but there was no telling whether it was actually valid. After all, they didn’t truly understand the Liberation phenomenon in the first place. But right now, the only thing that mattered was that they persuade Kiriya. They needed to lend a helping hand so she could find the courage to take that first step. Sure, maybe it was ultimately just BS—but it was enough to change their world, and that was good enough for Taichi.

“Actually, uh... I hurt someone when I was Liberated, too. I hurt Nagase.”

“What...?” Kiriya gaped at him.

“I mean, I didn’t punch her or anything, obviously... but yeah, I hurt her. And... not to make it about me, but it kinda wrecked me. So I decided I’d distance myself from everyone else... and then I thought to myself, *maybe this is how Kiriya feels.*” He couldn’t stop himself from grimacing slightly at the memory.

Kiriya’s gaze softened just a bit—almost like she was reassuring him with her eyes.

“But... despite everything, I still want us to hang out together. I know it’s stupid and selfish of me... but I think maybe you want the same thing. So... could you find it in your heart to trust yourself again?”

It was what he wanted for her more than anything.

“You nailed it, Taichi! Good job! *Buuut* we still haven’t tested it yet. Now c’mon, Yui! Let’s go to a love hotel!”

Thank god her parents aren’t around to hear this...

“Go to hell! I mean, even if we *did* go, what are the chances you’d conveniently get Liberated during that time frame?!”

“We’ll stay there as long as it takes until you come around!”

“Oh my GOD, *FINE!* I get it, okay?! I’ll go!”

Taichi and Aoki looked at each other in shock.

“What?!”

“For reals?!”

Cheeks flushed pink, Kiriya hung her head, averted her gaze, and whispered in a tiny voice, “To *school*.”

“Wait, so... you mean you’ll stop hiding in your room...?” Aoki asked timidly.

“W-Well, it’s like a hundred times better than letting you take me to some sleazy hotel, obviously!”

“What? C’mon! Ten times better, tops!”

“Does it matter...?” Taichi muttered.

“But... I’m still scared... I mean, I don’t know what might happen, so... if things start to look dicey... please do whatever you can to stop me.” She bent forward from her sitting position atop the bed until she was practically prostrating herself.

But before Taichi could agree—

“Tsk tsk tsk.” Aoki folded his arms and wagged his index finger at her. “*Stop you?* I don’t think so.”

“Wh...? So... you won’t help me...?” Kiriya’s eyes welled with tears.

Taichi couldn’t let that slide. He rounded on Aoki. “What the hell, man?!”

“N-No, that’s not what I mean! Look, Yui... I think what you *meant* to ask was...” He mouthed something at her, and she squinted at his lips.

“Please... protect me’...?” she murmured.

“Gladly.” The lanky knight dropped to one knee and bowed to his long-haired princess as she hung her head once more.

Fact: The easiest way to avoid hurting someone was usually to avoid their

presence entirely. You couldn't hurt someone if you didn't interact with them, after all. But by isolating yourself, you stood so much to lose. Some things were simply impossible for one single person.

But with a little assistance from a friend, together they could make miracles happen.

Granted, there was no guarantee it would work out perfectly every time, and they had no viable means of fighting back... but at the very least, they could hold their ground.

Alone they were weak, but together they were strong—and together they could stand up to «Heartseed».



This sucks. God, I'm trash.

I'd been so stressed out lately. Day after day with no respite—it was wearing on me. I was in less-than-ideal condition.

More than anything, I couldn't believe how badly it hurt to have to stay away. It felt like there was this gaping hole in my heart, and nothing else could fill it. It was driving me insane.

So I lashed out. Hard. Way too hard.

I didn't actually mean to hurt her. Hurting her would defeat the whole purpose of my plan. I just wanted to keep her away, that's all.

Then again... I guess anything's better than letting her get too close to a monster like me.

Earlier this morning at school, I realized I couldn't find my newly purchased pack of lead refills for my mechanical pencil. I figured I must've just forgotten to pack it in my bookbag, so I decided I'd check as soon as I got home. And somehow, despite the godawful day I had, I managed to remember to look for it.

I tore my room apart searching for it, but of freaking course, I couldn't find the damn thing for the life of me. It was just *gone*. So I gave up and decided to swing by the local office supply store to buy another one.

I walked inside and quickly tracked down the lead refills. There, it occurred to me just how stupid it was to have to turn around and spend another 200 yen on something that should have lasted me weeks, if not months.

That was when the Liberation struck.

By the time I came back to my senses, I was a few dozen meters from the store, holding my item... with no receipt.

For a moment I was utterly shocked. Then I dashed back into the store, put the pack of lead back on the shelf, and staggered all the way home on shaky legs.

I just couldn't believe it.

I admit, I scoffed at the idea of having to buy it, but surely I never seriously considered *stealing* it.

I mean, that's illegal. Even if there weren't a law against it, it would still be an extremely unethical thing to do.

And yet... apparently I must have wanted to do it.

Apparently I'm just a piece of trash who only cares about herself.

There's no use pretending the Liberation made me do it. After all, the others haven't committed any crimes under its influence. No, this was all me.

Deep down, I'm just a bad person... and that means I need to stay away from them.

Around that time, I got a call from Iori of all people. I didn't feel like answering it, so I let it ring.

But then she came to my house, and at that point I knew I had no choice but to let her in.

First we apologized to each other for what happened earlier today. Then Iori told me she wanted me to come back to the clubroom—that she wanted to hang out with me, even if it meant risking the possibility that we might fight or hurt each other.

I don't have the words to express how happy I was to hear that.

And she *did* have a point. In the end, what did a few trampled feelings really amount to?

Unfortunately, in my case, it isn't that simple. Maybe everyone else is relatively harmless, but the Liberation makes me a threat. Besides, I didn't distance myself to avoid hurting anyone—I did it so they wouldn't all start to hate my guts.

At the end of the day, I'm the type of person who puts her own needs above all else... and that makes me dangerous.

So I told lori I needed some time to process my feelings and promised her I would come back to the clubroom eventually.

...I just wish I knew whether it's a promise I can actually keep.

lori looked disappointed by my response, but she said she would respect my decision.

"You don't hate us, right?" she asked.

I laughed. "Of course not."

"Okay, that's good. Well, just come by whenever you're ready. We'll be waiting for you."

With that, she went home. I was flooded with guilt... but more than that, I felt relieved. And then I cursed myself for being happy that she was gone.

Now I find myself wondering... Why was it lori who tracked me down? Normally Taichi's the one who fusses over everyone like that. Then again, she did mention that the two of them had talked it out earlier...

Wait...

Why do I care so much?

Chapter 6: Can't Unsee It

The next morning, Kiriya came to school, just as she'd promised.

The second the news broke, Nagase bolted out of the classroom and dashed over to hug her. Kiriya seemed a little embarrassed by this reaction, but was delighted all the same.

It had been quite some time since all four of them—Taichi, Nagase, Kiriya, and Aoki—last chatted.

Though Kiriya had been absent for over a week, Class 1-A welcomed her back with enthusiasm.

The only person missing was Inaba, who was unusually late for school that day.

"Man... Now if only Inaba would show up..." Nagase sighed.

The two of them sat in the clubroom, awaiting the arrival of Kiriya and Aoki. Now all they needed was Inaba—the final piece of the puzzle.

"I tried talking to her earlier, but, well... She's just so observant, and she worries over the tiniest little things... Let's just give her a little more time. It wouldn't be right to force her into it."

He knew he needed to keep in mind that Inaba had her own priorities. Still, he hoped she'd hurry back sooner rather than later.

Just then, the door opened, and Aoki walked in.

"Hey, y'all..." His smile was strangely stiff.

Kiriya followed him inside, her expression dismal, her gait unsteady. She was carrying fat plastic bags in both hands.

"What's wrong, Yui?" asked Nagase, her brows furrowed in concern.

There was a pause.

“...I bought too much stuff.”

A moment later, Kiriya uncereemoniously dumped the contents of her bags out onto the table: chocolate bars, potato chips, melon buns, *dorayaki*, pudding... all manner of sweets, snacks, and pastries.

“Yeahhh... I took my eyes off her for two seconds and bam, she got hit with like, hunger or greed or somethin’,” Aoki explained as Kiriya collapsed, defeated, into a folding chair.

“Wow... How did you even afford all this?”

“Well, I just got my allowance earlier this morning, and I put it all straight into my wallet... Uggghhh... Like seriously, how am I gonna survive the rest of the month?!” she wailed.

“Could’ve been worse, I guess,” Taichi muttered.

“Okay, so... what are you gonna do with all of this, anyway?” asked Nagase.

“God, I don’t know... If I take all this home, my parents are totally gonna flip out...”

“Yeah, and I don’t think they’ll let you return it, eith—”

Suddenly, Aoki froze mid-sentence, eyes wide. No sooner had Taichi realized he was Liberated— “Gimme that *mitarashi dango*!”

In a blink, Aoki’s Liberated hunger had turned him into a *dango*-zombie.

“What the?! Stop it! Don’t just take my stuff, you jerk! Hey! Knock it off!”

The two of them promptly descended into a game of tug-of-war.

“Jeez, talk about harmless... Had me worried for a second there.” Nagase heaved a sigh of relief. “I guess it makes sense, though. Who wouldn’t want to chow down on all these tasty—” But then she froze, and her easygoing expression iced over.

Don’t tell me—

“That sandwich is MIIINE!” Nagase dove over the table to grab a pre-wrapped sandwich from the pile of snacks.

“Nagase, chill!” Taichi shouted, but naturally it had no effect.

“What’s gotten into you, Iori?! I never said you couldn’t have it! We can share —”

That was the moment when Kiriya lost her grip on the pack of *dango*—and Aoki, unbalanced from tugging, went tumbling backwards.

“Whoaaa!”

Meanwhile, Kiriya froze for a split-second, eyes widened. The next moment— “Chocolate chip melon buns! I’m starving!”

—she grabbed a package, tore it open, and began to devour her prize.

The three of them were going to town like participants in an eating contest.

“All three of you at the same time? Give me a break... Then again, I’m glad it happened now while we’re all just hungry—”

[Eat.]

He couldn’t believe it... but sure enough, he heard a voice in his head.

He cursed the impulse coursing through his body, knowing he was powerless to stop it. With all four of them Liberated, who could possibly rein them in?

Sadly, this food for thought proved fruitless.

“I... I want chocolaaate! GIVE ME CHOCOLAAATE!”

“Ugh... FML...” Kiriya muttered.

The four-way Liberation had lasted no more than three minutes. Obviously, this wasn’t long enough for them to eat their way through everything, but nonetheless, the results were horrific. The table was now littered with half-eaten pastries and barely touched snacks.

“Hahaha... uh... What do we do with this mess...?” Nagase asked, smiling stiffly.

“We should probably eat these leftovers...” Aoki replied.

“We should chip in some money, too,” Taichi piped up.

“Alright then... uh... Let’s have ourselves a little party! Everybody get hype!”

Nagase shouted, her tone one of forced cheer, her gaze flickering to Kiriyaama.

Kiriyaama groaned in response. Then, after a moment, she lifted her head and slammed her fist on the table. “Screw it! You guys ate a bunch, so I will too!”

And so the party began... after they returned with drinks (from the corner store, that is; the vending machine was now completely empty).

“Eh, who cares? Think of it like a... pre-field trip celebration!” Aoki suggested.

“Why would we celebrate a field trip in the first place...?” Taichi retorted.

“Oh, that reminds me. I heard 1-A and 1-C both chose the same spot,” Nagase mused.

At this, Kiriyaama perked up. “We did?”

Though each class was allowed to choose its own destination, the eligible locations were rather limited, so it wasn’t unheard of for classes to overlap.

“Yup! I’m kinda excited. Then again, I guess each class is probably gonna be doing its own thing, so we might not get to hang out...”

That forced Taichi to remember that Fujishima had put him on a team with her, Watase, Nagase, and Inaba. But as things stood, Inaba was keeping her distance from the rest of them. Not only was she avoiding the clubroom, but she barely talked to them at all.

He knew she was doing it for a reason, of course, but...

Secretly he hoped maybe she’d reconsider over the course of the school trip.



The others were acting differently today. Something must’ve happened.

Ever since yesterday, I started thinking maybe I’m better off isolating myself. After my near-theft, my thoughts plummeted into a negative spiral, and I was terrified that I might do something even worse next time. Thus, I contemplated skipping school and hiding out in my room.

But then Iori got in touch to tell me that Yui had come back to school, and I changed my mind. How could I hide in my house after preaching about the evils of isolating yourself? I’d look like a total hypocrite.

Besides, I know if I tried it, they'd come barging in here... and who knows what could happen once they invaded my personal bubble.

Once again, I'm only ever thinking of protecting myself.

At school, Yui went out of her way to track me down. She said to me, "Just so you know, I'm not mad at you for what you said, in case you were worried about it."

I tried to apologize, but she smiled and said "No, you were right."

Her smile was the real deal, too.

Taichi, Iori, Aoki—they all stopped to talk to me. And they all told me they wanted me to come back to the clubroom whenever I was up for it.

I'm such a piece of shit, and yet they still think of me as a friend...

On the one hand I'm grateful, but on the other hand, it just makes me even more desperate not to lose them.

I can't go back there now. Not in this sorry state.

And so I went home, all the while glancing at the Rec Hall building out of the corner of my eye, knowing they were probably up there waiting for me.



After Inaba Himeko arrived home, she spent the afternoon on the Internet, alone and miserable.

She couldn't help but draw parallels to her past—back when she refused to trust anyone, back when she had all her walls up, back when she had "functional acquaintances" but no actual friends. Admittedly, it wasn't all that long ago.

In her middle school yearbook, there wasn't a single decent photo of her to be found anywhere—not even in a group shot. Rather, she was always in the background or slightly out of frame.

Indeed, there was no lingering memento of any special moments she shared with close friends... because those moments never existed to begin with.

All this time, she'd never given it much thought—but now it made her chest

strangely tight.

When did I get so weak?

Late that evening, her mother knocked on her bedroom door. “Himeko, your class advisor’s here to see you. He says he needs to speak with you about something. You haven’t gotten into any trouble, have you?”

You’ve gotta be shitting me.

But sure enough, there it was, standing behind her: an entity wearing the face of [Gotou Ryuuzen], advisor for Class 1-C and supervisor for the Cultural Research Club. Its posture and expression were closer to a regular human this time, but Gotou’s usual energy was noticeably missing—a dead giveaway.

There stood «Heartseed», gazing at her with soulless eyes.

“I’m sure it’s nothing, Mom. Don’t bother bringing us tea or anything. No tea, okay? Okay?”

At last, her mother reluctantly nodded and left the room. Once she was gone, Inaba shut the door and propped her chair under the knob so it couldn’t be opened from the outside. Then she turned back to face it.

“What the fuck are you doing here?!” she hissed, using all of her restraint to keep her voice down.

“Oh... Making sure no one can overhear us... A wise decision...” In an instant, it returned to its usual demeanor, exuding limp lifelessness from every pore.

With «Heartseed» here, it felt like her room had been transported to a different dimension. What was going on? Normally it preferred to leave them to their own devices. So what was it doing here? Was it going to make things worse, or— “Surely it’s not over already, is it?” she asked with a false air of composure.

Why? What for? What do I do?

Questions bubbled up one after another, and her mind was starting to spin out of control. She needed to keep it together.

“No, it’s not over just yet...” it replied in an eerily lethargic voice that sent a

shiver down her spine.

It made her sick to think that this thing had violated the sanctity of her home. Still, it seemed relatively harmless for the time being, so she relaxed a bit... though her guard was still up, of course.

“Then what do you want? Hurry up and get the fuck out of my house, asshole.”

“I mean, isn’t it obvious...? Don’t you remember, Inaba-san...? Didn’t I tell you I’d make things interesting if it came to that...?”

“Weren’t you only going to do that if we isolated ourselves?”

“Huh...? Is that how I phrased it...? Oh well... It doesn’t matter... After all... you’re halfway there yourself.”

This caught her off-guard. Hastily, she stammered her way through a comeback. “Wh-What? No I’m not. I’m still going to school, aren’t I?” Meanwhile, goosebumps pricked up on her arms. This only served as an unpleasant reminder that «Heartseed» was observing their every move.

“I must say, Inaba-san, you are truly fascinating indeed... Never a dull moment with you...”

“Can we get to the point? Just tell me what you want from me already. Or did you come all this way to waste my time with pointless small talk?”

“Small talk...? Actually... you might not be too far from the mark there... I’m only here to shake things up, you see...”

“Shake things up? What’s that supposed to mean?”

She didn’t understand what it was insinuating.

“Well... I did say too much slacking would force me to intervene, yes? Wait... Maybe I forgot to tell you that part... Oh well... Now you know...”

“Give me a fucking break! ‘Slacking’? What are you, my boss?”

“Am I...? Who knows...” As usual, its voice was aggravatingly languid. “You know, Inaba-san... You sure seem to be having a tough time...”

She debated whether to admit it, then realized it would be pointless to try to

hide it. "Yeah... No thanks to you, dickhole."

What was «Heartseed» trying to get out of her? She tried to read its expression for clues, but it offered nothing more than a blank canvas.

"What are you struggling with...?"

"Gee, I don't know. Maybe it's your stupid Liberation shit!"

"No, no... That's not what I mean... How do I put this... Why do you care so much about maintaining the status quo between you and your little friends...? If it pains you, then why not tear it down?"

Her breath caught in her throat. How did it know so much?

No... Surely she would never be tempted by a proposition like that.

"...The friendship I have with them is more important to me than anything else. You seriously think I would wreck it on purpose? Think again."

Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine «Heartseed» would be the first to hear her admit it.

"Ah... You sound quite determined... What a shame... Based on your current mental state, I was hoping its destruction would send you on some sort of violent rampage..."

"Not sure what kind of manga you've been reading, but I'm nowhere near that melodramatic. Seriously, where do you get these ideas...?"

Was he supposed to be intimidating or not?

"Alright then... One last armor-piercing question... Is that really what matters to you above all else...?"

"...What?"

"Isn't there something else...? Something you care about just as much...?"

"...Of course not..."

There couldn't be.

What could possibly be more important than her bonds with her friends?

"Come now... Admit it... That little detail you've been trying your hardest to

pretend you haven't noticed... Because the moment it comes to light, it'll destroy everything—"

"Shut the fuck up!" she screamed. At this point, she could no longer afford to worry about keeping her voice down.

"Ah... You've realized, haven't you... Once you see it, you can't unsee it... There's no turning back now..."

Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Fucking STOP!

All I want is to keep the club together. These other feelings are just... temporary. Yes, that has to be it.

I don't need another worry to add to the pile... I'll fall apart at this rate...

"Goodness... I wasn't expecting that to work quite this well... Ah... I sense that perhaps the climax is close at hand... I can't wait to find out what happens next..." «Heartseed» stared at her with a knowing gaze, despite its empty eyes.

She clutched at her chest. She couldn't speak. Her brain—her heart—was a total mess.

Meanwhile, «Heartseed» just stood there in silence. Then, finally, it spoke again.

"Well... It's safe to say I've done my job for the day... I suppose I'll be going now..."

Done its job? How? If it wanted to leave, why was it taking its sweet time? It didn't make sense. None of this made any goddamn sense.

"...What do you get out of fucking with us, anyway?" she asked in a tiny, strangled voice.

She wasn't expecting an answer, but surprisingly, «Heartseed» saw fit to give one nonetheless.

"Well, let me ask you this... Would you say humans have achieved their ideal form...? Anyway... No need to think about it too hard..."

For some reason, this pissed her off.

"Is it cool if I deck you in the face?"

“You can, but... I’ll just switch out of his body right before it connects...”

He disgusted her. She wanted him gone ASAP.

“Merely an observer” my ass!

But first...

“Are you going to check in with the others, too?”

At her question, «Heartseed» curled its lip ever so slightly. “Interesting...”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“Not to worry... I only came to see you... I mean... Do you really think I’d go to all this effort four more times...?”

“Hah. No, I’m not that stupid. So why come all this way, anyway? Wouldn’t it have been easier just to corner me at school?” she spat.

It helped to think about something else for a change; it felt like she was working her way back to her usual invincible self.

“Not as easy as you might think... But more importantly... Isn’t this entertaining in its own right...?”

“Not to me, it isn’t... Why do you always show up in Gotou’s body, anyhow? If you can possess anyone you want, surely you could have chosen one of my clubmates or even someone in my family.”

At this, «Heartseed» froze for a moment, staring blankly. “Well... Unlike this one, most humans find it alarming to discover large gaps in their memory...”

That made sense.

“Oh... I said I was leaving, so why am I still standing around talking...? It was all so pointless... I got nothing out of it... Ugh... What was I thinking...? Forget it... I’d better go... For now, please try not to isolate yourself too much... Otherwise I may have to take action again...”

And so «Heartseed» walked out of the room, leaving its veiled threat hanging in the air.

Just to be safe, she followed it all the way to the front door. Then, once it had left the house, she went back to her room and watched it through the window

until it was gone.

Chapter 7: Showdown

Thanks to that asshole, now I have even more to worry about.

I know I should just try my best to forget it, but... at this point, I don't think I can keep up the charade any longer. No matter how desperately I wish these feelings didn't exist, I know they're there, buried deep in my chest.

Honestly, a piece of trash like me has no right to feel this way. I'm lucky I have any friends at all... and that's why I don't want to have to let them go.

If this gets out, I'm screwed. I have to keep it secret at any cost, or else I'll never be able to show my face there again, and our little pentagon will fall apart.

And I can't let that happen.

I don't know if I can endure it, or survive it, or hide it, or protect it...

All I know is, I absolutely refuse to destroy it.



Three days had passed since Kiriya returned to school—three blissfully uneventful days for Taichi and the rest of the CRC.

At least, as far as they knew.

The Liberation continued to strike, but none of its occurrences had any lingering complications. Perhaps their relief at resolving the tension in their friendships had had a positive effect on their mental state.

Now they just needed to get Inaba back.

Before they knew it, it was Friday—the day of the field trip.

It was a calm, sunny day. By the time Taichi arrived at school, a large chunk of the first year students had already gathered on the athletic field, all of them dressed in casual clothes for the hike. Admittedly, it felt strange to see

everyone out of uniform at the one place they were obligated to wear one.

There was a palpable sense of excitement in the air—save for a few of the girls, who were complaining that it was “impossible to dress cute for a stupid hike.”

One particular group of students caught his eye, and he made a beeline for them.

Nagase Iori was wearing jeans and a hooded khaki jacket over a striped T-shirt. It embodied a natural, casual style without seeming to try too hard to create such a look, which gave it a certain mature appeal.

Kiriyama Yui was decked out in a frilly, plaid shirt dress and skinny jeans—an outfit clearly chosen with strenuous activity in mind without sacrificing feminine flair.

Inaba Himeko had turned up wearing a black sweater that emphasized her curves and a pair of capri pants that flattered her long legs—a simple, no-frills outfit that looked positively stunning on a slender build like hers. She looked like she’d walked out of a fashion magazine.

Lastly, the final member of the Yamaboshi High School Cultural Research Club, Yoshifumi Aoki, wore his favorite hoodie.

“Morning, guys!” Taichi called out. They smiled and greeted him in kind... save for Inaba, who simply glanced in his direction, stony-faced.

Though they were caught up in a hellish supernatural phenomenon, they pressed on regardless—something that spoke to their strength of character, considering they were all still wrestling with the fear of lashing out and causing a scene. Under these volatile circumstances, they were forced to maintain a slight distance between themselves and those outside of the club... but they chose to stick together. And together they could overcome any obstacle.

As for Inaba, on the other hand, she had grown increasingly chilly with the four of them, and at this point it was a little concerning. They’d told her to reach out if she ever needed their help, but as her problem wasn’t readily apparent, there was nothing more they could really do.

Hopefully she just needed a little more time.



Once everyone was present, they boarded the rental bus and set off.

When they arrived at the foot of the mountain, they stepped off of the bus, grabbed their stuff, and started their hour-long hike. That said, the incline itself was far from steep, and the students progressed up the trail without too much difficulty.

Not much of note happened during the hike, save for Nagase's desire to be pampered(?) getting Liberated, resulting in her clinging to Taichi and pouting, "Uggghhh, I don't wanna waaalk! I don't wannaaa! Carry meee!"

Then Gotou Ryuuzen—their class advisor, a grown man who definitely wasn't Liberated in any way—started whining, "Nnngh... Hiking with a hangover really sucks... Help me, Inaba-san...!"

To which she replied, "You knew we were having a field trip today! Now start walking, you sorry excuse for a teacher!" Evidently she was more of an adult than he was.

At last, they reached their final destination: a camping facility halfway up the mountain. From here, the plan was to split into their assigned groups and start making curry... but they discovered a slight problem, which the president of Class 1-C, Fujishima Maiko, relayed to them after speaking with the facility manager: "Basically, half of the groups will get to use the newer outdoor cooking facilities, while the other half will be forced to use the older ones."

Their chosen campsite was well-stocked with all manner of cooking tools and ingredients. Unfortunately, the facilities had begun to wear down with age, and thus they were now in the process of undergoing renovations. For financial reasons, however, they had yet to finish remodeling the whole site, and now half of the stoves and sinks were brand-new while the other half were practically falling apart. Normally they got around it by having the campers only use the newer equipment, but with the number of students present today, that was looking rather unfeasible.

Thus, each group was to be paired off at random to play a round of rock-paper-scissors. The winner would earn their group the privilege of using the fancy new equipment.

“Good luck, Taichi!”

“If you lose this, Yaegashi-kun, there *will* be consequences.”

“You mean he’ll have to be punished, right, Fujishima-san? Yaegashi, you’d better win!” Watase piled on.

With the support(?) of his fellow members, Taichi headed up to represent his group in a match.

“I’m telling you, I really suck at this game...”

“You’ll be fine, Taichi! You’ve already used up all your bad luck!” Nagase grinned. He could tell she was one hundred percent confident that he would win... and he couldn’t bear to see it.

They’d chosen their group representative by hosting their own round of rock-paper-scissors just prior. The theory was that if they sent the loser up, that person would theoretically have used up their bad luck and have only good luck remaining... and Taichi had lost three times in a row.

“Hey, Taichi... You had better win this for us.”

“If you want us to win, then you should go up inst—wait, huh?! Inaba?!”

“What, am I not allowed to talk to you?”

“Huh? N-No, it’s fine...”

It had been so long since she initiated a conversation with him. Was the school trip having the desired effect after all?

“I gotta say, you sounded pretty passionate just now,” he muttered quietly.

Inaba scowled. “Have you *seen* that ancient crap?” She pointed over at the aging sinks, which were full of dead leaves, likely from months of disuse. “How the hell do they expect us to use that shit? It’s unsanitary! We already have to cook outside as it is!” she growled, balling her hands into tight fists.

Oh, right. Germaphobe.

And so he proceeded to promptly lose the match.

It was obvious at a glance that the outworn stove and sink would need a

thorough cleaning before they could be used, and since it was his fault they were stuck using it in the first place, Taichi volunteered to lead the cleaning efforts.

After bagging up all the trash, he headed to the trash disposal site. There, he found Inaba clucking her tongue loudly as she hurled her trash bag in with the rest.

“Look, uh... I’m really sorry,” he offered.

She clucked her tongue again. “It’s fine. I don’t care anymore. Why do you suck at rock-paper-scissors so bad, anyway? I saw Iori and Watase dragged you into a few more rounds ‘just as a test’ or whatever, and you *still* lost every time? Do you have the world’s worst luck or what?”

Trust me, I wish I knew.

“Come to think of it, my morning horoscope said I’d have a really bad day today... Maybe that’s it...? Oh, whoa, there’s a cliff over here. That’s kinda not safe...”

Mere steps away from the trash disposal site, the ground dropped off sharply, plunging down the side of the mountain.

“Yikes. A fall from that height would probably kill you. Try not to get *unlucky* over there, alright?”

“Ha ha, very funny. It’s so obvious, I’d have to jump off on purpose.”

“Okay, whatever... What? What do you think you’re grinning at?”

“Oh, nothing... Just feels like a long time since we last talked, that’s all.”

“Wha...?! No, I... I just... Rrgh!” Inaba glared reproachfully back at him, blushing bright red.

“What? Come on, don’t be mad.”

“Fuck off!”

With that, Inaba stormed away.

At last, it was cooking time.

With Fujishima in charge, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba were tasked with ingredient prep. Considering all that talk about “maintaining an atmosphere of love and peace within our class,” she’d probably singled them out for a reason.

And so the three of them washed and chopped the vegetables. Nagase did her best to try and keep a conversation going between them, but Inaba barely responded. She’d been in a sour mood ever since their last conversation... Maybe he should’ve kept his mouth shut.

Seeing Nagase trying so hard, however, Taichi decided to throw her a bone.

“Wow, Nagase, you’re pretty talented,” he remarked as he observed her impeccable knifework.

“I guess I’m decent. I’m always cooking stuff at home.”

“That’s neat... Hmm... You could use more practice though, huh, Inaba?”

Inaba slammed her knife down hard against the cutting board.

Crap... Got a little too honest...

“Taichi!” Nagase shot him a withering look.

But just as Inaba began to shake with rage—her almond-shaped eyes suddenly flew open.

Oh god, is she Liberated? Please tell me she’s not Liberated while she’s holding that knife! That would be really not ideal!

He braced himself to take action. Worst case scenario, he’d be forced to physically stop her.

Inaba leaned in sharply. “You think this is the best I can do?! Well, think again! You haven’t seen anything yet!”

Judging from her sudden overreaction, it was safe to say she was definitely Liberated... but what had set her off? Was she overly sensitive about her lack of skill?

Then, for some reason, she turned on Nagase. “And you, lori! Don’t get so full of yourself just because Taichi gave you one measly compliment!”

“Wh-What are you talking about?!”

“Enough talk! It’s on! Let’s find out who can chop their cucumbers the fastest! I’m gonna trounce you! And once I beat her, Taichi, you better change your tune about me! Alright, go!” Without waiting for them to agree, Inaba began to slice cucumbers like a woman crazed.

About then, Fujishima stepped away from the pot of rice and walked over to them. “I see you’re all getting along swimmingly over here! Seems I was right to put you all in the same group.”

What part of this looks like “getting along” to you? Taichi retorted silently.

Inaba was about one-third of the way through her cucumbers when she suddenly fell perfectly still. She was still holding her knife, but it was clear the Liberation had faded.

“...I’m gonna go cool down for a minute,” she muttered, her face beet-red.

“O-Okay,” Taichi and Nagase said in unison.

The prep work continued for some time afterwards... but Inaba still had yet to return. Concerned, Taichi decided to go looking for her.

He weaved his way between the outdoor cooking stations, each bubbling with rowdy chatter.

“We gotta peel the carrots!”

“No we don’t! They’re better unpeeled!”

“Turn the heat down!”

“Uh, guys?! It’s burning!”

Though some students complained about how “annoying” and “lame” the event was, they all seemed to be having a good time regardless.

“Where are you, Inaba...?”

Just then, two figures caught his eye: Kiriya and Aoki, who looked like they were having fun with the rest of Class 1-A. As he watched, Aoki waved Kiriya over. Puzzled, Kiriya headed over to him, and he stooped down with his hand cupped at his mouth in a secretive gesture. Tucking her hair behind her

ear, Kiriyaama leaned in to listen.

No awkwardness, no hesitation—just two friends sharing a moment together.

Aoki leaned in close and whispered something to her. When he pulled away, Kiriyaama looked at him, and they both burst out laughing.

Moments like these, you'd never guess that Kiriyaama had a phobia of men. She wasn't treating Aoki any differently than any other close friend.

Taichi contemplated asking them if they'd seen Inaba around, but ultimately decided he didn't want to interrupt.

After wandering around the entire campsite with no luck whatsoever, he gave up and returned to his group's station—to find that Inaba had returned ahead of him.

Wish someone would have told me, he thought.

"I'm sorry! I tried to call you, but my phone's out of service up here," Nagase explained. Meanwhile, Inaba said nothing; instead, she glared at him accusingly.

"Slacking off, Yaegashi-kun? You'll be eating the burnt parts of the rice, then. And I'm talking the *really* burnt stuff. The rest of us will be splitting whatever's salvageable."

Great. Now Fujishima was mad at him *and* he was being punished for their group's failures.

As the other groups were putting the finishing touches on their curry, Taichi's group still hadn't quite settled down to eat.

"Fujishima-saaan... Can we *please* eat now...?" Nagase whined, exhausted with hunger.

"Not yet. Just wait."

As it turned out, Fujishima was weirdly particular about things when it came to curry. According to her, her custom blend of spices required a specific amount of boiling time. As far as Taichi was concerned, though, no school activity warranted this level of effort.

“Fujishima-saaan... Hurry uppp...!” Nagase was clearly at her limits.

“Just a little longer... Nearly done now... I’m adding the final ingredient as we speak...” Or so she claimed, anyway; she didn’t seem to be doing much of anything beyond watching the clock.

Inundated with the world’s most appetizing smell, waiting was akin to torture.

Inaba hadn’t spoken up, but it was obvious she was pissed.

“.....There! It’s ready!”

At last, Fujishima had given the all-clear. With their hunger now at unbearable levels, they each took turns serving themselves at the speed of light. Then, finally, it was time to dig in.

“Mmmm!” they moaned in unison.

“They say hunger is the best spice, but I beg to differ. No, the best spice is love!”

Setting aside Fujishima’s usual nonsense, the curry was absolutely godlike.



And so they enjoyed their meal under the clear blue sky, the four of them chatting away while one Inaba Himeko listened in silence. Every time the conversation shifted in her direction, she responded noncommittally and took tiny bites of her food.

Once she finished eating, she rose to her feet. The next step was to take her dirty dishes to the sink. Surprisingly, their curry had actually turned out pretty decent—no, downright tasty.

She was in the middle of washing her plate when Iori walked up next to her. “That curry was pretty good, huh, Inaban?”

“Yeah.”

She hoped it sounded convincing.

She’d been forced to interact with them on multiple occasions over the course of this trip. There had been some close calls, but thankfully she managed to endure it and recover.

Iori smiled sweetly—a contagious sort of smile.

How she wished she could be happy alongside the rest of them.

Then, before she knew it, Taichi was on her other side. “Inaba, are you bleeding?!”

“Huh?” Startled, she looked down at her hand, unsure where he meant.

“Right here! See?”

Taichi grabbed her hand and turned it. Sure enough, there was a hangnail on her right index finger, and it was bleeding slightly. She hadn’t even noticed.

“Oh...”

“What do you mean, ‘oh’?! Come on!” Taichi turned on the faucet and plunged her hand under the stream.

“Stop! I can do it myself, stupid!” She hastily jerked her hand away.

“Okay, well, you’d better! Don’t let it get infected!”

Then Taichi wandered away, waved over by Watase.

Haah. He’s such a mother.

She stared down at her index finger. The hangnail must have happened a while ago, because the blood had already congealed.

Her hand should have been chilly from the water, and yet it burned strangely hot—so hot she almost worried it might make the sink boil over.

Her chest ached.

[...***...]

Gently, she pressed her finger to her lips. They were both searing hot, far beyond her normal body temperature.

Her whole body was boiling, and her chest hurt so bad, she was ready to lose it.

She gave her finger one last parting nibble, then reluctantly pulled her hand away from her lips— “Hey, Inaban? Just wondering, but...”

Her heart leapt into her throat so hard, she thought she might cough it up

entirely.

Flinching, she turned in the direction of the voice. There stood lori, eyes wide as saucers.

Her heart began to thump in her chest. She couldn't breathe. A series of questions flickered through her mind one after another; how long had lori been standing there? What had she seen?

She knew she barely counted as a girl to most people, but nevertheless, she still had a keen sense of female intuition. And right now, that intuition was telling her that these questions were all pointless. Truly, pathetically pointless.

Then lori began to speak once more.

“Do you have feelings for—”

She knows.

All the evidence was right there, provided lori knew where to look—the chief example being the very first documented instance of Liberation.

Inaba had told them she'd only made a move on Taichi because he was the only one there at the time.

But what if that wasn't necessarily the truth?

They'd made it so far together, but now lori was about to say his name. And the moment she did, everything they'd built would come crashing down.

Why?

Stop!

Please don't!

Don't say it!

I don't want to ruin everything!

Their club was the one place she called home. It meant more to her than anything, and she wanted to protect it, even if she wasn't worthy of sharing a space with the others.

Don't take it away from me!

Please don't let it be over... I don't want it to end!

If it ends, I don't know what I might do...

Please, please, please, please—

And so Inaba Himeko bolted from the spot.

She headed deep into the mountains, off the trail, ducking between the tall, slender trees. The ground was papered in a layer of dead leaves, but thankfully it didn't impact her speed too badly.

She could hear someone shouting after her, but she ignored it and kept running, trampling the vegetation underfoot, dodging any obstacles with the shortest possible detour—anything to get away from there even a single second faster.

Someone was chasing after her, but she didn't look back. Instead, she kept her gaze fixed firmly ahead of her.

How could she have been so goddamn careless? It made her sick to her stomach. Had she been Liberated? She seemed to recall hearing a **[voice]**... but maybe she'd simply imagined it.

She was so stupid for doing that. Stupid for even *wanting* to do it. She'd told herself a dozen times that she needed to be careful... Had she let her guard down? Or was she just weaker than she thought she was?

Those feelings were nothing more than the lingering effects of a fleeting fever dream.

She was supposed to have her priorities straight, after all.

Her breathing escalated. Her throat was dry. She wanted to puke. Her stride grew more desperate, and she stumbled a few times—but she kept running.

Why?

Was it mere chance that she'd managed to keep it hidden the past few days? Or had the Liberation simply made it impossible to disguise her intentions?

Was «Heartseed» going to take away the one place she felt she belonged?

Would she lose the thing she loved most of all?

Was this to be the last time a group of good people considered her a friend, even if only briefly? Would a piece of trash like her ever get another chance in her lifetime?

No. Almost certainly not. A monster like her was better off spending the rest of her days hiding out in her room with the lights off.

They were out of her league.

She always knew this façade would fall apart eventually... She just thought she would get to have a bit more time.

For as long as she could remember, she'd been holding out hope that she could stay with them... as long as she stayed the strong, smart, responsible Inaba Himeko they all knew.

She never imagined it would end like this. But now the dam had burst.

Being with them was what mattered to her most, and it was far more than she deserved. So why did she want more? She was so stupid. Hadn't she known better than to get too greedy?

She'd tried her hardest just to survive the Liberation without getting too close, without screwing things up, without anyone finding out. Now that she was overly aware of her feelings, they were growing stronger by the minute—but she'd told herself that didn't matter as long as she could just survive until the phenomenon went away.

But now that was gone. Why? Why, why, why, why, why?

What if there was no coming back from this?

For now, Inaba let her legs carry her away from her worries—to a world where she was all alone.



Run. Run. Run. Run. Run.

Maybe if she could just escape to someplace far, far away from here... Maybe then she could pretend it all never happened.

Sadly, that wasn't actually possible. And now she was forced to face reality.

Her lungs hurt. Her legs burned. At last, she fell to her knees in the middle of a small forest glade, surrounded on all sides by tall trees. For a moment it felt like she was the only person left in the world—but that fantasy was quickly and unceremoniously shattered.

"Inaban... Inaban... Inaban...!"

She could hear someone gasping her name through ragged breaths.

With her poor physical endurance, she'd always known she'd never be able to outrun Iori.

Still, she didn't turn to look. Instead she stared at the ground and tried to catch her breath. Her mind reeled.

What do I do? What's about to happen? What do I say to her? Has she figured it out? Can I still bullshit my way through an excuse? What are my options? What are my prospects? Good? Bad?

It all blurred together to create a formless, useless haze.

Sweat dripped from every pore, evaporating away her excess body heat. Somehow she was both warm and cold at the same time.

All of her senses were now a jumbled mess that her brain struggled to process.

But time ticked on regardless. Gradually, her heartbeat slowed.

Then a shaky, watery voice broke the silence.

"Inaban... Why...? Please, just... help me understand... Do you... have feelings for Taichi too?"

Stop! Don't ask me that! I don't want to hear it!

And yet, as much as she wanted to plug her ears, her body was frozen in place.

There was no going back now.

After a moment of silence, she heard footsteps approaching. Then a hand on her shoulder forcibly turned her to the side. Through her blurred vision she

could make out lori's face, wet with tears.

The next moment, lori's eyes widened. What was so startling about her appearance, she didn't know, but she wasn't sure she wanted to find out. It likely wasn't a pretty sight.

"Why...?" lori took a few steps back, then collapsed on the spot. "I just don't understand... You were always... trying to get me and Taichi together... the whole time..." She pressed a hand to her forehead like she wasn't sure how to react. "I mean... I always figured you liked Taichi... as a friend, anyway... Was it more than that...?"

Inaba's sight warped as she bit back a sob.

"But then... why did you try so hard to get me and Taichi together...? Did you decide to let me have him or what...?"

Inaba shook her head. There was never any anguished sacrifice. She'd wanted to get the two of them together from the very start.

"If you wanted to let me have him... then... why do you look so miserable?"

Evidently it was showing on her face.

Yes, her every waking moment was nothing but abject misery.

All at once, lori jumped to her feet. "Inaba Himeko! Explain yourself *RIGHT NOW!*" Her expression had transformed into one of pure rage. Fury danced in her eyes like flames. This anger was far too abrupt—oh, of course. The Liberation must have kicked in.

But that didn't matter. She was still Nagase lori either way.

"Explain! Explain! *Explain it to me!*"

Their whole world—the one thing she wanted to protect—was crumbling apart. She could feel it.

"If you don't tell me right now, then our friendship is *OVER!*"

Please don't! Please, please, please, please, please! Anything but that!

She couldn't take it anymore.

"I just... I had to... or else we'd all stop being friends..." As she spoke, she

realized for the first time that she was crying. Tears were streaming down her face.

“Why?! Why would we stop being friends?!” lori demanded.

Sobbing, Inaba forced the words out.

“Because... in any given group of people... once things get all complicated with romance or whatever... there’s just always fights! Friendships end over this stuff!”

She didn’t know if it was actually the case. After all, she’d never fallen in love before. Never had any close friendships. Never trusted anyone on this earth.

Until now, she’d spent her entire life alone.

“Aoki likes Yui... and Yui doesn’t seem to mind... and you were looking for someone who could be there for you... and Taichi’s naturally inclined to fill that role... so I thought... if I helped you and Taichi get together... it would just... balance everything out...”

That way they could all stay together. That way the club could remain intact. Being with them meant the world to her.

“What? Balance everything out? That’s... That’s so *stupid*! I thought you of all people were smarter than that!” lori screamed at the top of her lungs.

Confronted with lori’s harsh sentiment, Inaba felt something inside her snap. All at once, she was flooded with emotion—everything she’d kept hidden away—and for once, she didn’t try to hold it back.

“All my life, I was always alone! Always! Then I made it to high school and finally found people I could call my friends... and I just... I just didn’t want to lose that! And I didn’t know what I was supposed to do!”

She’d spent her whole childhood being lonely. Then, for the first time in her life, she discovered what it felt like to not be lonely anymore... and that made the thought of going back all the more terrifying.

For a moment, lori froze, staring at Inaba’s face and blinking. Her expression softened for a moment—then her eyes narrowed once more. “Your life story isn’t the problem! If you’re feeling lonely, then tell us! If you’re that worried

about our friendships all falling apart, then just *tell us*! Not everyone can read between the lines like you, so if you want the rest of us idiots to understand you, then you have to use your words! I don't care if it's awkward or scary—just *TELL US!*”

How could she possibly admit it out loud? How could she let herself be that vulnerable? She needed to be strong... or else the others wouldn't need her anymore, and she'd lose her place among them.

“Why would you do something so stupid without talking to anyone?!”

“Well, what did you want me to do, then?!”

“Nothing! You don't have to do *anything*!” lori screamed, her hair disheveled.

“What? Yes I do! Otherwise I'm just useless! I'm just unlovable trash!”

“You're *not* trash! Don't talk about yourself like that!”

“But it's the truth! I'm not a good person like the rest of you!”

“Then explain to me why I care about you!”

For a moment, Inaba forgot to breathe. She could hear lori panting heavily.

“I love you so much, Inaban! I'll keep saying it until you believe me! And I'm not the only one! Everyone else loves you, too!”

Then... I'm not unlovable after all? Unless—

“You just love my strong, competent outer persona. The real me is way too weak and pathetic.”

“I love every pathetic version of you! ...No, that's not right... You're a better person than you think you are, Inaban! ...No, that's not it either...” lori shook her head, and Inaba could practically feel the other girl's emotions raining down on her. “There's no such thing as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ people. It's not that simple, Inaban! I mean, what's so different between you and me?! Nothing! We're no different from each other! Please just believe me, okay?! If I'm such a ‘good person’ to you, then take my word for it, just this once!”

lori was so insistent on the idea that the two of them were equals. It wasn't just for show, either; no, it was clear she believed it from the bottom of her

heart. After all, she was Liberated.

Maybe...

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Inaban! You don’t have to try so hard. I’ll always be there for you! ...No, that makes it sound like I’m the one doing you a favor... Whatever! I’ll always want to be your friend, no matter what! Please, just let me!”

Maybe it’s high time I believed in her for once.

“I... I always hoped someone would say that to me someday...” As she spoke, fresh tears streamed down her face.

Maybe it was safe to trust her friends and be herself. Maybe they would still love this weak, pathetic side of her. Maybe she could still belong with them, even at her very worst.

At last, the possibility felt real to her.

“...Thank you...” Deep down, she had longed to hear those three words from someone, and now she felt nothing but overwhelming gratitude. This moment was all she needed. She couldn’t possibly ask for anything more. “Thank you for everything you said, Iori. It’s honestly more than I deserve. But at this point... it’s too late. I’ll just get in the way of your relationship with Taichi... and I don’t want to wreck the club, so... I can’t go back there.”

She realized her tears had dried.

“How come?” Iori asked, her eyes piercing straight through Inaba. Was she still Liberated?

Inaba shivered, then spoke. “Well... it’ll just be too awkward, won’t it?”

“Why would you think that?” Her tone was cold and aggressive. Then she continued. “Actually, it just hit me. Earlier you said that if me, Taichi, Aoki, and Yui all get together, then it’ll ‘balance everything out.’ But wouldn’t it still balance out if it was you and Taichi instead? Why does it have to be me?”

“Well... it doesn’t *have* to be you, but... I always thought you two would be good together, right from the start. You’re just so compatible... You’re like the perfect couple. A-And it’s not like I had any special feelings for Taichi at the

time... N-Not to say I do now, but—”

“Why are you still lying to yourself about that?!” Iori screamed at the top of her lungs. Her voice was so shrill, Inaba wondered if it might make her throat bleed.

“I... I’m not lying to myself...”

“Even if you did go about it the dumbest way possible... you were just trying to keep our friendships intact, right? That was your top priority, right?”

Precisely.

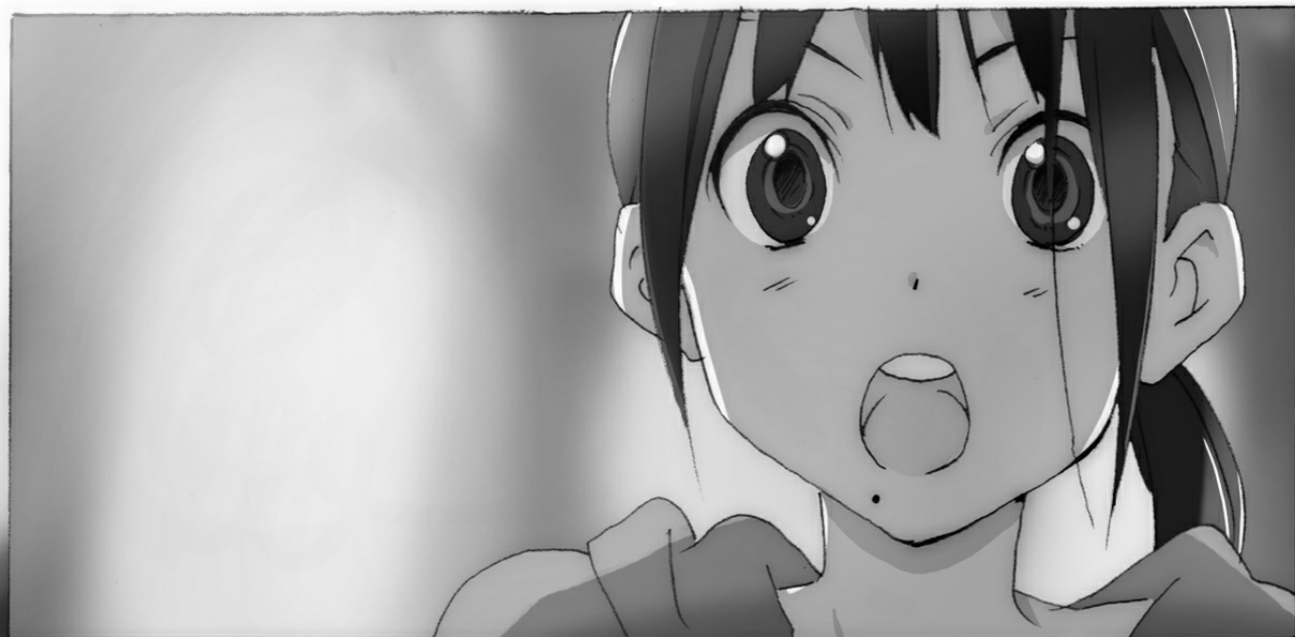
“But you still fell in love with Taichi—hard enough that you were worried it would ruin everything, right?! And you couldn’t stop yourself, right?! Otherwise you never would have freaked out like this, right?!”

She felt a lump in her throat. All these feelings... this splitting ache in her chest...

“So now you’re in a situation where you want two different things, but pursuing one of them means sacrificing the other. So what would Inaba Himeko do?!”

Pressured, Inaba answered on reflex. “Well... obviously I’d choose the more important one...”

“No you wouldn’t! This is Inaba Himeko we’re talking about! You’d try to get them both anyway!” By this point, Iori had screamed herself hoarse. Inaba could only imagine the pain she must’ve felt... and yet she screamed on regardless, all for her friend’s sake. “You know you could do it! The Inaban I know could totally steal her friend’s crush if she wanted! And she could smooth things over so it wouldn’t end up awkward between them later! All she has to do is put her mind to it! No matter how the cards are stacked against her, she never gives up! Never admits defeat! That’s the Inaba Himeko I know! Arrogant, patronizing, manipulative, and fully committed—*that’s Inaba Himeko!*”



So, what sort of person was Inaba? What sort of person did she want to be?

“Either way...” Iori paused and took a deep breath, suggesting this was the final stretch. “*Our friendship would never fall apart over some stupid boy!*” She exhaled slowly, caught her breath, and smiled. “At least, I trust that it won’t. Please, Inaba, forget your anxiety and just come back to the clubroom. It’s no big deal. You’ll see.”

She could feel her tears welling up again, but she blinked them back desperately. Biting her lip, she sniffed and looked up, then wiped the dampness from her eyes.

She was hopelessly weak, and she’d been desperate to spare her own dignity. So she hid it—until one day she just couldn’t anymore.

She had no confidence in herself. She thought she was trash.

But here was someone who professed to like her—someone who gave her encouragement even though she herself stood nothing to gain from it.

She had underestimated Nagase Iori’s strength. Now she could only hope that someday she’d be as strong as her. Then maybe she could live up to the expectations she’d set with her outer persona... That was the version of Inaba Himeko she wanted to see.

And so she spurred herself into action. Her legs threatened to give out, but she pushed herself to her feet unassisted. She stood up straight, planted her feet firmly apart, put her hands on her hips, and opened her mouth to speak.

This was for Iori... but it was for herself, too.

“Alright. Fine! But you’ll regret it, you hear me? I’m a goddamn... f-force to be reckoned with! If you want me to fight you so badly, then I’ll just have to... crush you beyond recognition! Beyond a sh-shadow of a doubt!”

Her throat hitched a few times, but she pushed on to the end, looking directly into Iori’s eyes and ignoring the renewed urge to cry.

This was the girl she called a friend... a sister-in-arms... a romantic rival.

Iori looked straight back at her, and when Inaba finished her little declaration, she smiled softly—the sort of smile that could make anyone’s heart flutter.

Then it transformed into a cheeky grin.

“Just so you know, Inaban, I have zero intentions of going easy on you. I mean, do you really think you stand a chance against me?”

This made her smile, too—for what felt like the first time in years.

“Too bad your looks are all you have. There are countless ways to outshine girls like you,” she shot back playfully.

“Sick burn!” lori laughed.

“I will say, however... On the off chance you beat me... I’ll put everything I have into making sure things don’t get awkward for the club. For Taichi’s sake, anyway.”

She could do it. She had the power. She’d make it happen.

You want greedy? I’ll show you greedy. I’ll have my cake and eat it too.

“Likewise,” lori replied.

At last, the anxiety had faded. She’d been completely on edge ever since the Liberation struck, and now she was half-ready to pass out.

“You know, lori... you can be pretty intense.”

Surprisingly intense, actually. She couldn’t begin to tell where the Liberation started and ended.

This comment seemed to catch lori off-guard. She paused to think for a moment, then whispered, “Do you think that’s... the real me?”

“Hmm... Not sure. But I do think you meant every word of that... from the bottom of your heart.”

lori smiled and nodded. “Wait... At what point did I get Liberated, anyhow? And when did it fizzle out?”

Evidently even she wasn’t all-knowing. She was naturally strong, but at the same time, she was a perpetual wild card in any given situation.

I hope someday I can make it up to her.

But then lori’s expression faded entirely, to an inhuman degree—precisely the

sort of blank canvas Inaba was used to seeing on Gotou Ryuuzen's face.

"Listen... Don't take this the wrong way, okay...?" mumbled the entity now wearing Nagase Iori's face.

«Heartseed».

"Give me a fucking break. What do you want with me now, you son of a bitch?"

She hadn't witnessed it herself, but she'd heard from Taichi all about how «Heartseed» had possessed Iori's body only to summarily plunge her into the river. It nearly killed her doing that.

"Well... I wasn't planning on doing this, believe me... How do I put this... I figured it would be more fun... I mean, prudent... if I let you know as soon as possible..."

"The fuck are you talking about?"

She felt like she was about to pop a blood vessel.

"Oh, you know... I was just hoping to spice things up a little, really... Wait... That doesn't explain anything, does it...? Well, alright... Basically, the gist of it is... Yaegashi Taichi-san has fallen. And it wasn't me this time."

Her mind went blank.

"Honest... I haven't done a single thing... Anyway, this... what did you call him... 'goddamn martyr' sure is fascinating... Personally, I try to maintain a degree of moderation in these things, but... as you might expect, Yaegashi-san wasn't exactly planning for it—"

Inaba took off running full-speed back the way she'd come.

For a moment, she questioned whether it was safe to leave Iori behind, but ultimately decided she would be fine.

Loath as she was to actually believe a word «Heartseed» said, it genuinely didn't appear to hold any ill will or malice. Its only interest appeared to be in creating "interesting" situations and watching them play out. And if it had taken such a liking to the five of them, then surely it wouldn't want them to die.

But Taichi was a different story. Taichi was a goddamn bona fide idiot. He'd do anything for the sake of helping someone else... and that meant there was no telling what he might do under the effects of the Liberation.

The word "fallen" brought to mind one specific location—the cliff.

Then she remembered a comment she'd made to him at some point in the past.

—*What if you actually die this time?*

She couldn't imagine what could have led to him falling, but knowing him, he'd invent some insane reasoning...

So Inaba kept running.

Her lungs hurt. Her chest hurt. Her throat hurt. Her legs hurt. Hell, even her elbows hurt from landing on them earlier.

At some point she found herself wondering why she was running so fast, but even then she didn't slow down. She couldn't tell how much distance she'd covered, or if she was even running in the right direction, and the rational part of her brain was screaming at her, telling her the most efficient thing to do would be to stop for a moment to get her bearings—and yet she still kept running. Despite the pain, she staggered onward, fighting for every step.

"Agony" had a pretty ring to it, but in reality, she probably looked like a haggard mess. If anyone saw her like this, stumbling full-speed through the forest, she imagined they'd laugh at how ridiculous she looked.

She was so pathetically uncool right now. If only she could just stop trying so hard. She didn't want people to think her stupid or judge her for being weak. She wanted to maintain her tough girl rep... But she pushed all these feelings aside.

Worrying about keeping up appearances? That was the *last* thing she needed to be doing right now. So what if they laughed at her? Right now she needed to let this impulse carry her forward. To thine own self be true... if only to honor the friend who gave her that final push.

She kept going, and the trees thinned. There was sunlight up ahead. She could hear voices.

There, she came to a stop.

Her heavy breathing grated on her ears. Her heart was pounding ridiculously fast. What was the matter with her? Even she wasn't sure. Her feet were practically rooted to the spot.

Was she scared? Yeah, she was. What if she'd run herself ragged for nothing? The thought was frightening. What if they rejected her? She was terrified of anyone seeing her like this. It would likely change their perceptions of her forever. The image she'd built up would come crumbling down, and everyone would discover the frail little girl behind the curtain. *She's just a nobody*, they'd think. *We don't need her around*.

Besides, it wasn't like she could do much to help Taichi in the first place—
Oh, good. More excuses.

She was so good at bullshitting her way out of everything, wasn't she? She always managed to run away and avoid getting too invested. If she got hurt, she just told herself they weren't seeing the real her anyway, so it didn't count.

But maintaining that charade meant sacrificing everything the real her wanted... and starting now, she'd decided to be true to herself. She wanted to have more confidence, if only for the sake of those who claimed to like her.

And so Inaba Himeko ran on ahead.

Her knees shook with exhaustion, but she pressed forward regardless.

The light was getting brighter. The voices were getting louder.

She bit her lip and exhaled hard through her nose.

Then, at last, she made it back to the campsite.

She shot a quick glance around. Most of the students had long since finished cleaning up after lunch and were now entertaining themselves with various recreational activities. A few people noticed her arrival and pointed in her direction.

But that didn't matter now.

There, in the corner of her vision, she spotted Yaegashi Taichi sitting collapsed on a bench—

Chapter 8: Using Her Words

“Either way, Yaegashi-kun, what you did was needlessly reckless,” the president of Class 1-C, Fujishima Maiko, remarked as she sat on the bench beside Taichi, who lay with his head next to her. “I mean, think about it: you saw a kitten stuck in a tree and decided to climb up to save it, and when the kitten nearly fell, you jumped to catch it in your arms in midair, only to land squarely on your back in order to protect it from harm? It’s like something out of a movie!”

“I know... I just couldn’t help it...”

It was the truth. Even a martyr like him ordinarily wouldn’t have gone that far... if it hadn’t been for the Liberation, of course.

“In any case, I’m glad to see you’re unharmed. You fell from quite a considerable height, after all. And if I let someone get hurt on a school field trip, I would be unworthy of my title as class president.” She sighed and shook her head.

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“At least now I think I have a better understanding of what makes you so popular with the girls. I swear, you’re the dumbest man alive, but... there’s something about seeing you in action... Oh, but just so we’re clear, I haven’t fallen for you or anything like that.” She smirked. “I’m not that easy.”

Taichi wasn’t sure how to react to that.

“Anyway... Wait, is that Inaba-san? Yikes...”

Apparently Inaba had returned from wherever she’d disappeared off to. Taichi turned his head to try to look, but found he couldn’t see past Fujishima. What was the “yikes” for, anyway?

“Hmmm... As an apostle of love, I can tell that she’s not here for me. I’d better make myself scarce, then. Talk to you later, Yaegashi-kun.” With that mysterious comment, she rose to her feet and walked off.

“Fujishima? What are you talking about?” Taichi called after her, but she didn’t look back. “What *was* that...?” he muttered to himself, staring up at the sky.

Suddenly, Inaba’s face popped into his line of vision.

“Oh, hey, Ina—” he began, but quickly faltered.

She was breathing hard, her face drenched with sweat. Her hair was a disheveled mess, and a few strands clung to her cheek—no, in fact, she was a mess from head to toe. There were pieces of dead leaves stuck to her black sweater, suggesting she’d fallen to the ground, as well as a few frayed threads on her sleeve that implied she’d gotten it caught on something.

But above all, there were tears streaming from her eyes.

In all their time together, Taichi had never seen her cry—well, not the *real* her, anyway. She’d come close back when they believed Nagase was going to die, but she’d held back for the sake of keeping everyone else together.

And now here she was, puffy-eyed and sniffing. He must have worried her half to death.

Hastily, Taichi sat up to apologize.

“I’m so sorry, Inaba! P-Please don’t cry, okay?! I’m totally fine, I pr—UGK?!”

She promptly elbowed him in the solar plexus—harder than ever before.

“Hggggghhhh...! Ghhcckk! That was... so uncalled for... So much for being fine...” He felt the curry threatening to come back up, but he managed to hold it down. “Gah... haah... Holy crap, I thought that was gonna kill me... What’s your problem?!”

“Don’t scare me like that, you asshole!” With that, Inaba collapsed on the spot, seemingly uncaring if she got her clothes muddy. Her slender shoulders shook as she sobbed.

She was so delicate, so weak, so fragile—so *sweet*.

Gently, carefully, Taichi placed a hand on her shoulder.

After a long moment, Inaba wiped away her tears and whispered, “Once we

get back to school... there's something I want to talk to you about. Meet me behind the East Wing."



And so the time came. The students all piled on the rental bus, and together we headed back to the school.

I still looked like a total wreck, of course, and multiple people asked me what had happened, but I dodged the question.

Once we were formally dismissed, I pulled lori aside and told her what I was planning to do.

"Good luck," lori said softly.

"You sure you're cool with this?" I asked.

"Why not? I'm already way ahead of you as it is," she smirked. This little punk, I swear.

"Thanks," I replied, and I meant it from the bottom of my heart. "You know, I'm really proud to consider myself your friend," I added.

"I-Inaban... Oh my gosh... This is so out of character for you! I'm blushing! AAAAAHHH!" lori screamed as she dashed away.

...Hopefully she wasn't Liberated.

Just like that, the time flew by before I knew it. Poor Taichi. Knowing him, he'd wait for me as long as it took.

And so I headed out behind the East Wing. It felt a little weird to wander around campus in my regular clothes.

I turned the corner to reach my destination—and there he was, standing with his back turned.

Reflexively, I slowed my pace. A bit too much, actually. I was practically tiptoeing. God, what was I even doing? There was no point in concealing my presence when we were about to have a conversation! Now it was even *more* awkward!

Meanwhile, the distance between us began to shrink.

He still hadn't noticed.

I got closer.

He *still* hadn't noticed.

Just then, a loud *SNAP*. I carelessly stepped on a twig.

My heart nearly stopped.

Then, finally, Yaegashi Taichi turned.

"Oh... Hey, Inaba," he called out stiffly, then started jogging over.

A series of meaningless demands flickered through my mind—*Stop! Don't run over here! Just stay where you are!*—but naturally, Taichi hurried over regardless.

We were now standing approximately one meter apart—a metaphor for the distance between our hearts.

...Gee, how poetic. God, I'm so stupid.

"You said you wanted to talk about something?" Taichi asked.

Wait, damn it! I'm not ready!

I looked into his eyes, took a deep breath, and—

The words didn't come.

I looked away again. *What is my problem? Am I seriously getting cold feet at the last possible second?*

Still, I knew I needed to say it if I wanted to move forward. I needed to use my words if I wanted other people to understand me. It was utterly ridiculous to expect them to read my mind, much more so to get mad at them when they couldn't.

That said... the thing I was about to say was guaranteed to destroy the existing context of our friendship. And once I said it, there would be no way to undo it. Not only that, but there was a chance someone would get hurt, be it myself or someone else.

Worst of all, I would have to face the possibility of rejection—and frankly, I

wasn't sure I would be able to recover from that.

It was risky, and the stakes were high... but I had already made up my mind.

All I have to do is tell him how I feel. That's it. I can't chicken out. I have to say it. I have to be true to myself. I won't run, nor will I hide. Nor will I give in to my fears.

So, how do I say it? Wait... Oh god, I didn't plan for this at all! Where do I begin? How much do I tell him? How do I get him to understand? Do I launch into an entire spiel, or do I just leave it at one sentence? How do I explain it? What excuses can I give? How do I express these feelings? What am I supposed to do? Ugh, I'm so confused!

My mind reeled. My pulse quickened. I couldn't tell up from down. I couldn't think straight. Nothing made any logical sense anymore. But I needed to say something, fast.

I started to panic. There was no time to think of a long, eloquent speech. Even if I could, I wasn't confident I could get the words out.

Forget it. I'll just cut to the chase. I'll just say the most important part. Five words? Yeah, just five words. That's enough. Now please, mouth, just say five more words—!

"I'm in love with you."

There... I finally said it.



As Taichi received this short yet heartfelt confession, doubts began to crop up in the back of his mind.

You're kidding, right? Where did this come from? Why now? What about Nagase? Weren't you trying to play Cupid with me and her? What'll happen to the club?

Admittedly, there were times he'd faintly suspected this might be the case, but ultimately he'd decided his inflated ego was probably misinterpreting her intentions. After all, Inaba would never fall for a guy like him. Compared to her, he was practically incompetent... No, they all were. Not to put anyone down, of

course; Inaba was just very clearly the most mature of the bunch—thus he'd convinced himself it simply wasn't possible.

In a way, Inaba was an authority figure of sorts. Obviously she wasn't perfect; he knew she had her flaws like anyone else. Still, he had nothing but respect for her. She was always guiding the rest of them, but there wasn't much they could do for her in return—or so he'd believed.

Once again, he'd only ever been thinking about himself. Was there ever a point in his life when he'd actually considered the feelings of another person?

He'd done nothing but force his ideals, desires, and morals on everyone around him.

Meanwhile, Inaba was silently shaking, eyes averted, like she was scared stiff. Obviously it had taken all she had just to get those five words out. One look at her and Taichi realized just how dense he must've been to fail to notice how deeply she cared for him. Granted, he wasn't a mind reader, so he couldn't have known for sure without her telling him, but that was no excuse. If he wanted to be a decent human being, then he needed to start paying attention to the people around him.

No man is an island.

Taichi snapped back to reality, where Inaba stood trembling, her face red as a tomato. *Crap*. He couldn't just leave her hanging forever. He needed to say something, but the shock of her confession had broken his brain.

He began to panic.

Images floated through his head—Nagase, the CRC, Class 1-C—

So many choices, each with infinite outcomes, all with devastating effects—And then, Inaba looked up. Her almond-shaped eyes were brimming with tears, but nonetheless, her gaze locked firmly onto his. And just like that, nothing else mattered. She had put her feelings into words, and now it was time for him to return the favor.

"I... I'm really flattered that you feel that way about me, Inaba. Honored, really. From the bottom of my heart." Pause. "But as of right now... my heart belongs to Nagase."

He wanted that bright, sunny smile in his life.

There was a brief pause, just long enough for Taichi to wonder how she would react—and then Inaba laughed. Her face was still stiff, but regardless, she grinned from ear to ear.

“Gotcha... I figured as much. That said... if that’s how you feel ‘right now,’ then does that mean there’s a chance I can change your mind?” Her grin shifted into a smug smirk.

“Th-That’s not what I meant!”

“I mean, let’s be real. You two aren’t official yet, and I can’t imagine you’re ready to commit the rest of your life to her. We’re in high school, after all. Pretty sure I’ve still got time.” She paused, the world’s most mischievous smile on her face, then continued, “Oh, but don’t worry. I already told Iori my intentions, so it’ll be a fair fight. You can follow your heart or whatever, no need to walk on eggshells. This is between me and her.”

“W-Wait! Slow down! Wh... What are you talking about?! You make it sound like you and Nagase have agreed to fight over me or someth—”

“Precisely. Now suck it up, Yaegashi Taichi. This is what you get for making two incredible women fall for you.” She stuck her tongue out and grinned devilishly.

“W-Wait! Wait, wait, wait! Uhh... You can’t! You just can’t, okay?! I can’t handle this!”

Inaba took two steps forward. “Not my problem, dumbass.”

They were now merely inches apart. Then she put her hand on his shoulder and drew her lips to his ear.

He could feel her hot breath envelop his earlobe.

“Just you wait. I’ll make your knees go weak.” Her voice penetrated his brain and reverberated inside his skull. “Consider this payback for what you did to [me] at the hospital.”

She cupped his chin and leaned in. He caught a glimpse of her glossy dark hair—her large, almond-shaped eyes—her long eyelashes—and the next thing he

knew, her lips were on his, warm and soft.

Then, just like that, it was gone again.

“That was my pre-emptive strike. Anyway I’ll be back at the clubroom starting next week. See you then.” She shot him a seductive smile and licked her lips.

Full disclosure: it nearly made his heart stop.



As Taichi stood there, utterly stupefied, I turned and strode away—calmly, with my head held high, hoping to mask the fact that my heart was practically threatening to explode. Then again, I was walking way too fast to appear “calm” in the first place, so it was probably an exercise in futility anyway.

Regardless, I somehow managed to suppress the urge to run—right until I had rounded the corner. Then I took off like a bullet, running like my life depended on it, faster than I’d ever run before.

Why did I run so much today? I’m supposed to be the indoorsy type! God, I can already tell my legs are gonna hurt for days. Oh well.

I ran around to the back of the North Wing, made sure no one was around, then plopped down right there on the ground.

“AAAAAAHHHHH! Oh my GOD! I KISSED HIM! I’m gonna DIE!” I screamed down at the ground.

Then I burst out laughing.

“Haha... HahaHAAhahahahahaha!”

I could still feel him on my lips.

What do I do? Wipe it off? Lick it? Spit?

My body was boiling, boiling, boiling, boiling, boiling hot. My chest was tight, tight, tight, tight like it was in a vice.

Oh god, I’m gonna puke... Is this how love is supposed to feel?

My emotions were now in full control, overriding my rational thoughts and reducing me to braindead mush.

...Turns out, it's not so bad.

Epilogue: Inaba Himeko Strikes Back

“Be back later!”

That morning, as I headed for the front door, I glanced behind me to find my college-age brother standing halfway down the stairs, squinting at me suspiciously.

“What’s gotten into you, Himeko? Normally you always leave without telling anyone.”

“Lay off, asswipe!” I stormed out and slammed the door behind me.

The morning air was getting chilly lately, but fortunately the weather was pleasant today—not a cloud in the sky—and it would likely warm up later that afternoon.

A week after the field trip, «Heartseed» turned up at Rec Hall Room 401. As usual, it had given no advance warning of its arrival, and it turned up in the body of our class advisor, Gotou Ryuuzen.

Thankfully, the encounter was exceedingly brief. According to «Heartseed», the Liberation was starting to “lose its novelty,” and since it had been “reasonably entertained,” the phenomenon would now end.

Thank fuck.

What do you mean, we “got too used to it and stopped fighting back”? I was so annoyed, I couldn’t even formulate a response. It was all so pointless.

Will there be a next time? Unfortunately, I can’t imagine there won’t be. But when that time comes, we’ll have an unbeatable plan—and we’ll hand «Heartseed» his ass on a platter.

Admittedly, it still seems kind of impossible to beat him at this point... but no matter what crazy supernatural shit he throws at us next, I know we’ll survive. I’ll make sure of that.

Great, now I sound like Taichi. Hah.

...What? Now everyone on the street is giving me weird looks. Okay, sure, I laughed out of nowhere, but come on! I wasn't even laughing that hard!

As I walked down the street on my way to school, I asked myself: why did I fall for Taichi, anyway? Was it because I talked to him more than any other guy? Because he's the type to sacrifice himself to help someone in need? Because he helped me?

No... None of those really fit. Guess I'll have to give it some more thought.

I'm not proud of it, but... I'm pretty fucked up as far as humans go. I'm opportunistic to a fault; anytime I discover a loophole, my first instinct is to exploit it. And I tend to assume everyone else is the same way—all of them waiting to pounce the first chance they get.

So, coward that I am, I put up these walls around myself.

That's why I gather intel to give myself an advantage. That's why I act tough to discourage anyone from messing with me. That's why I hide away in my shell. Because then I have nothing to worry about... the same reason Yui isolated herself recently.

I think I've just always felt this way. And because of that, I haven't suffered much trauma—though considering how much of a coward I am, you'd think I would've at some point. But as it turns out, you don't stand to gain much from hiding. In most cases, you'll be forced to give up the things you really want. Even if it's within your reach, you'll be too scared to even try.

In the end, you'll lose everything. You won't realize it, because you protected yourself from feeling it, but it'll all be gone—all of the things you care about most.

It's hard to go through life wearing your heart on your sleeve. Without those walls to deflect it, the pain can cut deep, and everyone can see it. There's no pretending it hurt less than it did. But without those walls in the way, the warmth you feel grows that much stronger.

In other words, it's one of those "high risk, high return" things.

All this time, I'd never once let my walls down. I thought the real me was an unlovable monster. But then I met this babyfaced sucker by the name of

Yaegashi Taichi—honest, direct, and open, all to a frightening degree. He carried such overwhelming strength, I couldn't even hold a candle to him.

Did I look up to him? Not exactly. I just wanted to figure out his secret. More than anything, though, I was envious of his self-confidence.

You might think such a thing would be hard for a mere girl such as Inaba Himeko to grasp—and you'd be wrong. In fact, I was convinced he had to be delusional.

In the past, all that ever mattered was myself. But after I joined the Cultural Research Club, I realized that wasn't enough. I had so much more to learn—and if I stayed ignorant, I knew I'd get left behind. And so I decided to take a small step outside my comfort zone and make the four of them a part of my world.

And once I did, I started to love my life.

For the first time, I knew true happiness. And from there, it made me curious to see what it would be like to step outside my own walls for once—break through my outer shell and experience it all with no buffer in the way. After all, wouldn't I be even happier that way?

So that was how I first took interest in a guy like Taichi, who put up no walls of his own and would readily break others' walls down to get at the real them.

At least, I'm pretty sure that's how it happened, anyway. This is my best attempt at some sort of reasoning, and I'm not one hundred percent sure if it's the truth or not. Maybe there never was any logical explanation for my feelings. Maybe it "just happened"—like a biological instinct or whatever.

I love to act like I'm all-knowing, but I'm really not. In a sense, I might actually be the dumbest person in the club, considering all that time I spent locked away in my own little world.

And I tend to act a bit masculine, partly because I grew up around a lot of boys, but mostly because I'm afraid of being seen as a delicate flower. I'm terrified that people will see weakness in me and choose me for their next target.

But maybe it wouldn't hurt to be a little feminine. Maybe it'll broaden my horizons... Oh well. I guess it's a little too late at this point.

All this time, I never let anyone outside my immediate family call me by my given name, Himeko. For one, I was uncomfortable with anyone getting overly familiar with me. But a lot of it had to do with the etymology of the name itself: “princess child.”

I always hated the idea of princesses—feeble girls who sit on their asses and let everyone else do the hard work of protecting them.

But maybe this could be my first step. Maybe I could let them call me by my name.

“Himeko,” I whispered to myself in a tiny voice.

...Nope. Too weird. Maybe I needed a little more time.

Ahead of me I could see the sprawling campus of Yamaboshi High School. The street was crowded with students.

Now then... The Liberation forced me to maintain a ridiculously high level of self-restraint, but seeing as it’s gone, I think it’s time to go all-out.

I’m gonna put the pedal to the metal and blaze ahead full-throttle until I get *every last thing I want, goddamn it*.

I’m gonna be greedy and make demands—and I’m gonna love myself for it. After all, they say you can’t truly love someone until you love yourself... and if I can’t manage that, then who am I to expect it of someone else?

I mean, this is my first love. How can I possibly back down?

It’s time for Inaba Himeko to turn the tables.

The odds are stacked against me, but I like it that way. Besides, I know those two will continually drag their feet no matter how much I nag them... so consider me the hare to their tortoise. I’m the dark horse in this race, and I have no intention of losing.

I’m not just going to throw myself at him. It’s not my style. No, I’m going to plan the perfect strategy to make him melt at the thought of me... That’s just how I roll.

But... in the event that I lose fair and square... I’ll concede defeat with my head held high. Losing this battle doesn’t have to be a tragedy. After all, I’ll still

have my friendship with Taichi—and Iori, and Yui, and Aoki.

Our connection is unshakeable, and the bonds we share will always be there, even if I don't fret over them... so now it's time for me to open the door and take the first step onto a new path.

I've learned so many things—things you can only discover if you genuinely try with all your might. And the thing I learned most recently is this: Humans do not live to doubt, hate, shun, avoid, or reject others.

We live for love.

The End

Afterword

Hello, everyone! Anda Sadanatsu here. Thank you all for reading!

As the second volume in the Kokoro Connect series, this is my second-ever published work. For those of you who have yet to read the first volume, *Kokoro Connect: Hito Random*, I strongly encourage you to do so in order to enhance your reading experience!

Now then, the rest of this afterword is for everyone else.

As you're almost certainly aware after reading this far (or guessed from the title, if you haven't read the book yet and are starting from the afterword for some reason), there's no body-swapping in this book. Apologies to those of you who were hoping to see more of it. Rest assured, these kids struggle just as hard with the second phenomenon, so I hope you'll continue to watch over them. There is no greater joy as an author than to see so many readers follow my characters as they mature and grow.

Anyway... Whew. Looks like I've got another long-winded afterword for you! It's hard to write these without discussing spoilers, so this time around I'd like to talk about the "author profile" found on the dust jacket of this volume. There, I listed my favorite food as "noodles" and my favorite pro wrestling move as "shooting star press."

Let me ask you: do you have a favorite food? Or (please don't send me hate mail telling me that pro wrestling sucks) a favorite pro wrestling move? If you can name your favorite food off the top of your head, I'm a little envious of you. Doubly so if you have a favorite pro wrestling move, because you're probably really cool, and we should be friends.

...I can already tell that if I start talking about pro wrestling I'm gonna go off on some huge tangent, so let's set that aside for now.

The point I'm trying to make is this: it can be surprisingly difficult to name your absolute favorite in a given category.

Like anyone, you probably encounter situations in your day-to-day life—maybe not frequently, but every now and then—where you have to write about yourself or introduce yourself to a stranger. In times like these, if someone asked you to name your favorite food, do you give the exact same answer every time?

Frankly, I don't. All food is good food, you know? Japanese food, Chinese food, Italian food, Spanish food—they've all got their own appeal. Be it main dishes, side dishes, dessert... They've all got their own unique role to fill, and they're all great! All food is good food! (I'm like a broken record over here.)

Personally, I couldn't possibly choose one absolute favorite over all the others. So when people ask me this question, my answer is based entirely on how I'm feeling at the time... hence I gave a vague answer like "noodles" for my author profile.

...Nobody knows what the heck I'm getting at, do they? Okay, let me summarize it:

"Just because I said my favorite food is 'noodles' in my author profile doesn't mean I want to eat noodles 24/7! I like red meat and sushi too! And if you'd like to take me out to dinner, I'd prefer to go someplace really expensive!"

And there you have it.

...Wow, this afterword is a total waste of time for everyone, isn't it... Except me, I guess...

Only now does it occur to me that I would've saved us all some time if I'd just picked a different question for my author profile in the first place...

Well... Hopefully someone out there will come away from this having learned to take the answers to these sorts of questions with a grain of salt.

Now then, on to the acknowledgments!

First, I'd like to thank everyone who bought the first volume, sent in the questionnaire postcards, left reviews online, told their friends to buy it, and/or sent me fan mail (which I'll treasure forever, by the way; thank you so much). You all have my eternal gratitude. *Kizu Random* wouldn't be here today without

your support.

Second, I'd like to thank everyone who worked hard to help me get this book published, particularly my editor. Thank you for bearing with me!

Third, a HUGE thank you to Shiromizakana-sama for making time in her busy schedule to draw more gorgeous illustrations for my book. I can't begin to imagine how many people must have bought a copy purely for her art alone, and it is my hope that I've written a story worthy of being associated with her talent.

Lastly, I'd like to extend my full gratitude to all of my readers once again. I would be honored to cross paths with you again in the future.

—Anda Sadanatsu
April 2x1x



INABA
&
IORI ♥



Translator's Column

Hello, everyone! My name is Molly Lee, and I was the translator for Kokoro Connect: Kizu Random. Quite a rollercoaster, wasn't it? I'll bet a certain subset of the readerbase was thrilled to get so much quality Inaba content, too. (At least I was!)

First things first, let's talk about the title.

As a refresher (or for those of you who might have missed my J-Novel Club exclusive Translator's Column in the first volume), "kokoro" means heart, but it can also mean mind or soul. Paired with "connect," it suggests a linking of hearts. This is the overarching theme for the entire series.

Then there's the subtitle for volume 2: Kizu Random. "Kizu" means wound, scar, or injury, followed by the English word "random." Together, they suggest that this time around the kids are under direct attack, the next victim just as unpredictable as the last... only it turns out they're the perpetrators as well.

If I were to set an official English subtitle, however, I'd like to put the focus not on the passive victims but the root cause, as I did in my original (rejected) suggestion, Incendiary Impulse—a phrase I liked so much, I worked it into the prologue instead.

So, why shift away from a more literal translation like "random wounds"? Well, as far as thematic elements go, Kizu Random is obsessed with self-confidence and the lack thereof. Sure, pain is present on nearly every page, but so too is pain fleeting; it fails to grip quite as hard as the cold, clammy hand of self-doubt, threatening to undermine a majority of the cast at every turn. Wounds may heal, but fear lingers—fear of ourselves all the more so.

As translators, we all go through different stages as we progress through our careers. Fledgling translators in particular have a tendency to cling a little too hard to the words in front of them; eager to prove themselves competent, they sacrifice creativity and literary flow for over-literal faithfulness, and in so doing, often miss the forest for the trees. Inversely, as we gain experience in our craft,

we gain with it an understanding of our second language that lets us start to read between the lines. This is critical for a language like Japanese that likes to leave many things unspoken.

For a concrete example, take the common Japanese fixation on pale or translucent skin. There's a moment early in *Kizu Random* where Inaba starts stripping in the clubroom, and Taichi finds his gaze drawn to the "translucent skin" located, y'know, on her breasts. A fledgling translator might leave it at that, but those of us who have been doing this for years are quick to pick up on what he's actually staring at: the veins peeking through. English is an extremely direct language, so I chose to translate this section more naturally—that is, stated outright, rather than coyly left to the imagination.

So far *Kokoro Connect* has been mercifully devoid of any complicated kanji jokes, something I can always appreciate. That said, at one point Inaba explains her grievances with letting people use her given name, Himeko. I didn't want to break it down entirely in the main text and bring the narrative momentum to a crashing halt—hopefully my workaround still made sense to everyone—but if you were curious, I'll explain the kanji of her name in a little more detail. The first half, "hime," comes from 姫 (princess), and "ko" comes from 子 (child), a common feminine name ending. Together, this creates one extremely girly name.

Fun fact about me: I've had similar struggles with my own given name. Growing up in the '90s, I quickly learned that "Molly" was the sort of name people gave to their dogs rather than their daughters, and when people weren't comparing me to their beloved basset hound... or a party drug... there was usually a certain Little Richard song involved. These days, I've gone by Verde (my online handle) for so long now that I sometimes find it hard to think of myself as "Molly," but... well, hopefully Inaba and I can both find a newfound appreciation for our names as I spend the next year translating the rest of her spiritual journey.

Before I go, I'd like to thank everyone at J-Novel Club, particularly my editor, Adam Fogle. (Thanks for making sure I'm using all these idioms correctly!) And to the author, Anda Sadanatsu—should our paths ever cross, I'll buy you a beer (and some expensive sushi).

See you in volume 3: Kako Random!

Editor's Row

Ah, disinhibition. The bread and butter of mental alterations.

Once again, hello. I am Adam Fogle, editor of *Kokoro Connect: Kizu Random*. Or is it editor 'for' *Kokoro Connect: Kizu Random*? Well, I suppose the two phrasings are interchangeable.

That's a lot of what I do. Looking for ways to make the text even a little bit better. Which means, yes, making quite a few nit-picky edits. It's very different from the editor's role for an original work (as opposed to a translated one), because the book has already been written. Normally, an editor would have a lot of back-and-forth with the author, giving feedback on which parts aren't so great and need a little more attention.

My role as editor, the way we do things at J-Novel Club, is to make any and all changes I feel necessary, consulting with the translator, Molly, mostly only when I need clarification. As I mentioned last time, her writing is quite good, and similar to mine. She has the skills to do this herself. The reason we have this arrangement is the same reason people don't (or shouldn't, on a professional level) do their own proofreading. When you're the one who wrote something, you know it so well that your brain will tend to skim over it without recognizing mistakes or possible improvements.

The example I used before was ridiculous, but here's something a little more real from early in this volume.

Molly sends me the text with this line:

“(At one point Fujishima made the following statement regarding Nagase: “Relax. I have a new calling now. Nagase is no longer my top priority.” She didn't elect to clarify where Nagase was positioned on her to-do list.)”

And I rearranged things a bit to change it to this:

“(At one point Fujishima made the following statement regarding Nagase: “Relax. I have a new calling now. Nagase is no longer my top priority.” She

didn't elect to clarify what position Nagase had on her to-do list.)”

Which might seem a little odd, maybe even less clear. Why make that change? Because if you know the subtext of Nagase and Fujishima's relationship, it adds a subtle little double entendre, along the lines of “A position on my staff.” A little gross, but fittingly so given the context, as I see it. That's the kind of opportunity I'm usually looking for.

If you've read Molly's translator's notes, you might remember that she mentioned idioms. Man, what a headache. Though not as bad as kanji puns. Anyone who works on bringing media over from Japanese to English has woken up in a cold sweat at least once over those things. But I digress.

This time around, we encountered the expression “Zen wa isoge” (善は急げ), which has the meaning of “You should move with haste (when you have no doubts).” The translation provided to me used the idiom “Strike while the iron is hot,” which is a common way that it is translated. However, the English idiom has the exact meaning of “Act quickly while favorable conditions exist.” You may notice that though they are similar, the meaning is not exactly the same. Using that exact idiom in English would not have made the most sense in context either. That's the danger of expressions. They're pretty and interesting, so it's enticing to want to use them, but even more so than other parts of language, they rarely match up one-to-one. I ended up editing that to “With their doubts cleared away, Taichi and Aoki decided that there was no time like the present.” This wording keeps the full meaning of the original, while also using a simpler expression. If you can manage that, you're doing pretty well.

As it happens, while the characters are not too terribly difficult to edit, the source of a lot of these problems happens to be the narration. It's that literary tone that “takes the time,” so to speak, to use those expressions, and more grand and sweeping language to describe the big picture. I made sure to punch that up a little bit higher than might be normal. After all, this is a teenage drama. I wanted to embiggen the language a bit, to tonally match how as a teenager with relatively less life experience everything seems big and new and unique to yourself. Of course, in this case their experiences are pretty close to unique. But even without that, just in general, it's fitting because with less life experience, through no fault of their own, one is less equipped to handle life's

difficulties, so there's a good reason for everything to seem harder. It's not an invalid point of view, and that's something a lot of adults forget.

And about the narrator, it's not entirely neutral in perspective. I feel like it sometimes goes out of its way to throw shade on people, more so than the characters would, with a nice, dry wit.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you that matter-of-fact comments hurt the most?!"

Yes, Aoki, they're my favorites too.

Anyway, everyone learned an important moral this time. It's not enough to want to help someone solve their problems just so the problem goes away. You have to want what's best for them, and have a real idea of what it'll take to get them there. Simply applying pressure isn't going to help anyone. By the way, I was on the lookout this whole time for a good chance to use the term "virtue signalling," but it never really came up. To his credit, Taichi never did anything just to make himself look better, only to make himself feel better.

Thank you once again to Molly Lee for making this such a smooth process, and to everyone at J-Novel Club who made this possible. And thanks to Sadanatsu Anda for bringing such an enjoyable story into the world.

Looking forward to next time. I'll be talking about Heartseed, and someone else.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue: It Struck Without Warning](#)

[Chapter 1: Can't Stop Can't Stop Can't Stop](#)

[Chapter 2: By The Time We Realized, It Had Already Begun... Again](#)

[Chapter 3: Our New Normal](#)

[Chapter 4: Falling Apart](#)

[Chapter 5: Stronger Together](#)

[Chapter 6: Can't Unsee It](#)

[Chapter 7: Showdown](#)

[Chapter 8: Using Her Words](#)

[Epilogue: Inaba Himeko Strikes Back](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus: Translator's Column](#)

[Bonus: Editor's Row](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Translated by Molly Lee Edited by Adam Fogle

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